Coalition GOLD STAR Phasing Pass: For a year like no other! Travel wherever you wish, as often as you wish, provided each trip leaves you farther from Sol-3 Terminus. To start your return, reach the boundary beacon at 1460 light-years or make a trip that brings you closer to Earth. Alternatively, simply wait until the start of the eleventh month, and the direction will automatically reverse, giving you 30 solar days to make your way back. What will you do on your Grand Tour?

Drift down a Martian canal at Colony 5? Shear spider-sheep on a working Teegarden ranch? Pause to reflect on the Big Bad empire and the AI wars at the Cetan Heritage Museum? Hike through jungle ruins on Kepler 186f? Go abseiling in the abandoned cave towns on Kepler 62e? A lifetime of memories await!*

*Terms and conditions apply. Contact us for details. Prices and availability of phasing lines are subject to change without notice. All planetside activities must be arranged in advance and paid for separately. The traveler is responsible for ensuring the validity of all visitation tickets and entry permits. AI travelers must show proof of full backup prior to departure. Wetware travelers must purchase comprehensive travel insurance from an approved vendor. Not responsible for lost or stolen luggage. Check with us for weight restrictions and a list of prohibited items. Force majeure limitations apply to all transactions. Thank you for your patronage!

Mr. 4368696c6465 4861726f6c64

9 781794 788343

Postcards from a Neo-Romantic's Extrasolar Grand Tour

Postcards *from a Neo-Romantic's* Extrasolar Grand Tour

With Selections from the Writings of Lord Byron

Postcards from a Neo-Romantic's Extrasolar Grand Tour:
With Selections from the Writings of Lord Byron

First Edition

All rights reserved

Copyright © 2021 by David Petersen

All artwork copyright © 2021 by David Petersen and Mandy Conti

No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system, without the written permission of the author, except where permitted by law.

Lulu Press, Morrisville, N.C., USA

ISBN: 978-1-7947-8834-3

Feedback to support@lang-arts.com

System Stopovers

Sol 5
Tau Ceti (12 LY) 9
Gliese 1061 (12 LY) 17
Teegarden's Star (13 LY) 35
Gliese 581 (20 LY) 43
TRAPPIST1 (39 LY) 51
Kepler 186 (493 LY) 66
Kepler 1544 (1138 LY) 74
Kepler 62 (1200 LY) 82
Kepler 452 (1402 LY) 90

Sol

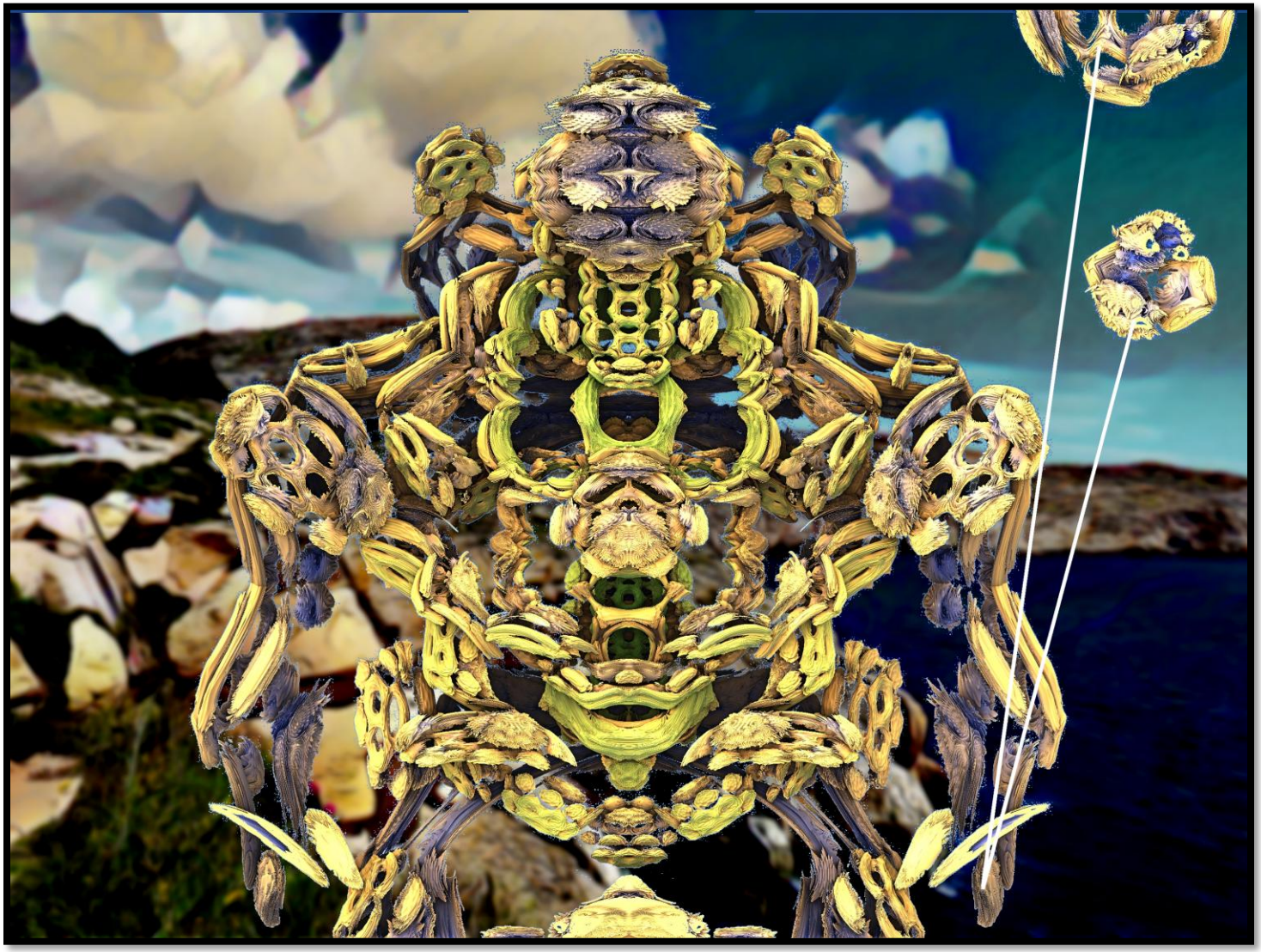
"Portrait of the Author with the Mediterranean Coast in the Distance"

Dear Me,

Hope you're well. I'm writing from the picturesque shoreline at World World, Mediterranean branch, the day before departure. As you know, arranging for a year off was problematic, but it was good of Central to finally allow me to clone my core, install it in a disposable frame, send it on the Grand Tour, and then reintegrate on return in a year's time. It's sad that I can't go, but at least I can go.

A cacophony of choice awaits(!), a din I plan on taming with long silent walks in extrasolar climes.

"*There is pleasure in the pathless woods, there is rapture in the lonely shore, there is society where none intrudes, by the deep sea, and music in its roar; I love not Man the less, but Nature more."* (Childe Harold's Pilgrimage, L.B.)



"Portrait of a Stranger at Sol-3 Terminus"

Dear Me,

My extrasolar Grand Tour began propitiously with a chance meeting in the Terran departure grid lounge. This fine fellow's love of travel instantly marked him as a kindred spirit, and his opinion of our blue marble was so positive that verily it put me to shame.

"*Ah! gentle, fleeting, wav'ring Sprite, Friend and associate of this day! To what unknown region borne, Wilt thou, now, wing thy distant flight?*" (Adrian's Address To His Soul When Dying, L.B.)

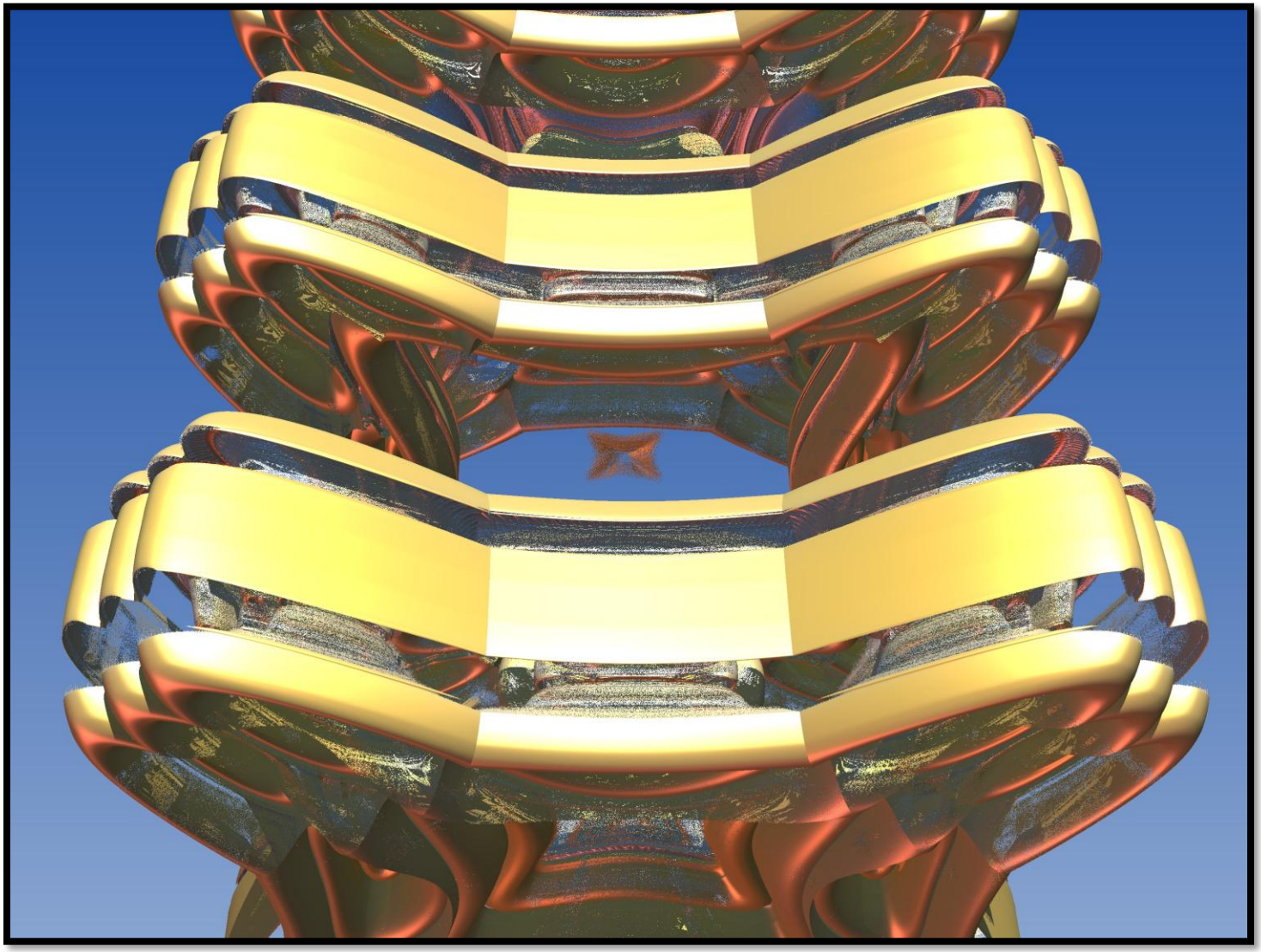
Tau Ceti (12 LY)

"Thruster Town, Tau Ceti f"

Dear Me,

During the AI wars, the skies were darkened by enormous ships shuttling troops to the front lines and returning with parts for the recycling plants. After the sentient dust had settled, the thruster pods were repurposed as makeshift dwellings for the few survivors. Thruster Town is a reminder that scraps must suffice when a golden age has been squandered.

"*In massy hoariness; the ruin'd wall/ Stands when its wind-worn battlements are gone; The bars survive the captive they enthrall; The day drags through though storms keep out the sun; And thus the heart will break, yet brokenly live on*" (Childe Harold's Pilgrimage, L.B.).



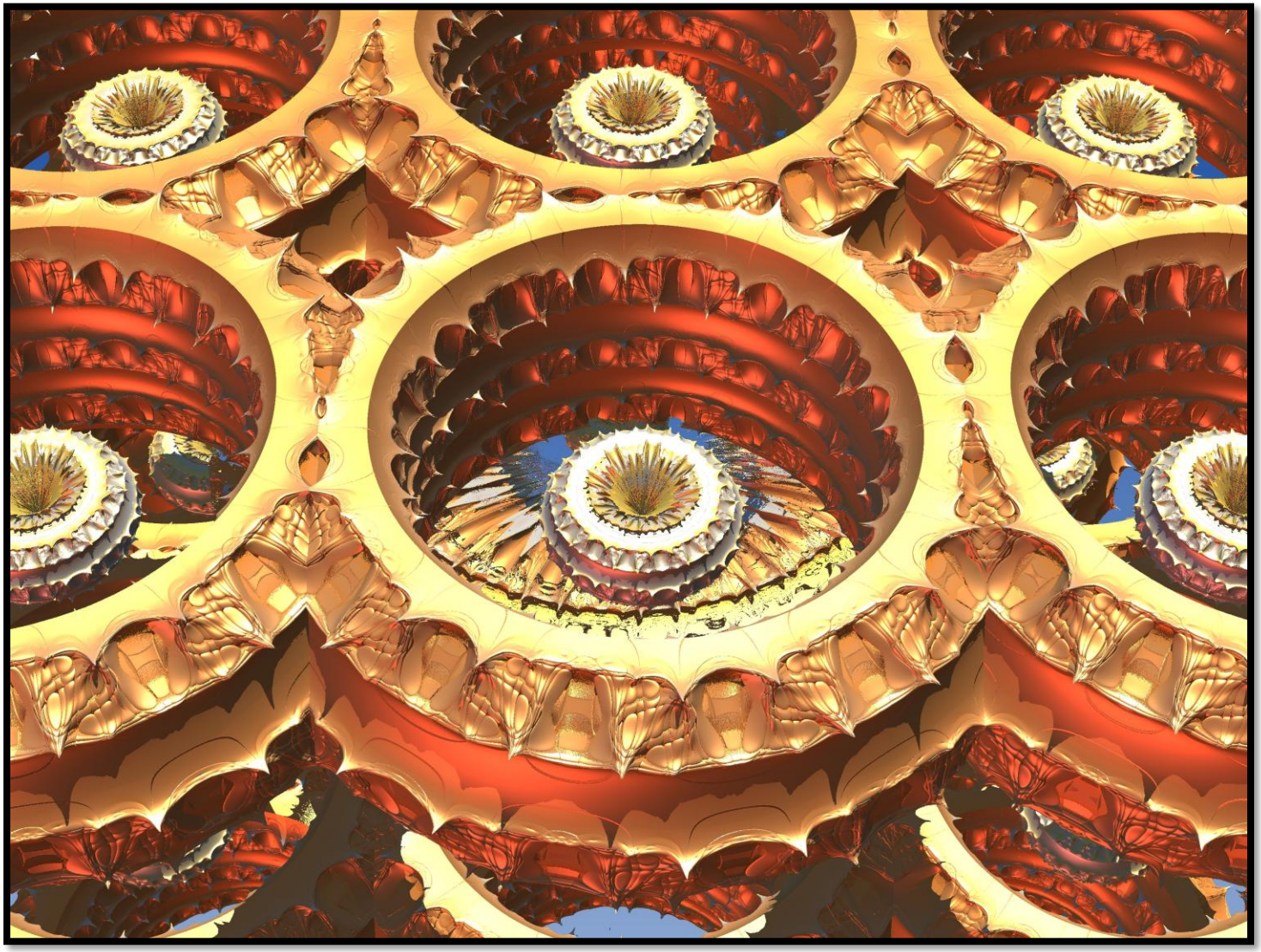
"Refuse Hill Near the Terdragon Hyocenter, Tau Ceti f"

Dear Me,

Sorry it's been a while. I took rooms for a couple of solar weeks at the border of the habitable zone, not far from Terdragon Falls. As a writer, I thought it would be worth putting up with the nanites and radiation for a chance to converse with the descendants of the Cetan workcamps. In truth, I think I was actually looking forward to the challenges of boutique squalor.

Surprisingly, their privation is mediated by a community of inscrutably motivated volunteers working quietly to provide the necessities of life to a population too worn down to offer much except an occasional appreciative glance. The worlds are bigger than I know.

"*Till taught by pain, Men really know not what good water's worth*." (Don Juan, L.B.)

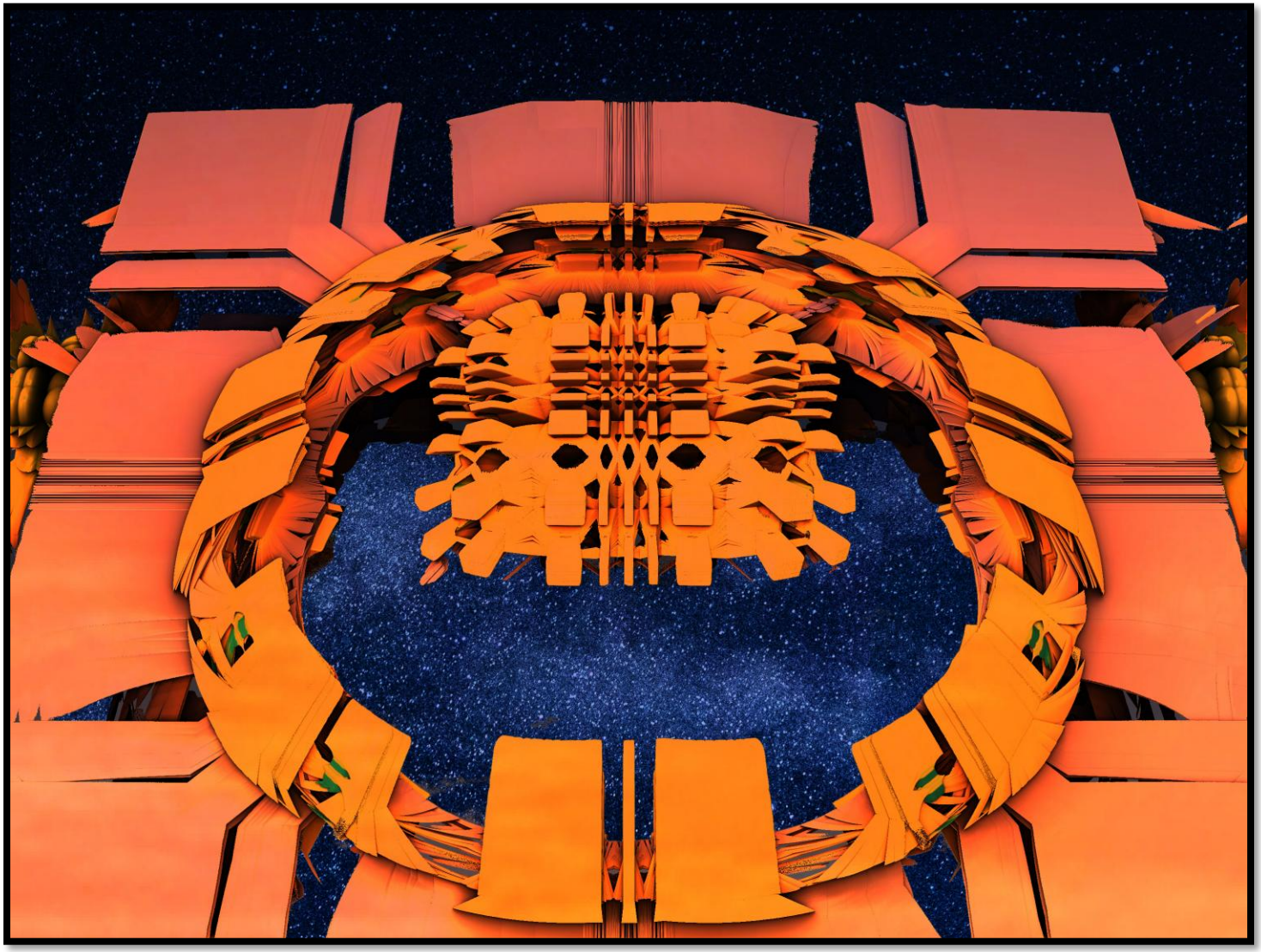


"Oasis City, Tau Ceti f"

Dear Me,

The monotonous desolation of the Hamiltonian Desert heightens the impact of this respite from the heat and dust when it suddenly appears on the horizon. How reassuring the gates must have been for stragglers displaced by endless cycles of famine and war! Standing alone in the orange dusk, I fancy their voices echo still, above the wail of the stinging sand and the hum of the maintenance droids.

"*In the desert a fountain is springing, In the wide waste there still is a tree, And a bird in the solitude singing, Which speaks to my spirit of thee*." (Stanzas to Augusta, L.B.)



"Tomb of the Unknown Android, Tau Ceti f"

Dear Me,

Now overgrown with air sponges, this monument was erected jointly as a tangible first step towards healing and reconciliation following the cessation of apocalyptic hostilities nearly a local millennium ago. An acknowledgment of shared pain and loss, the memorial complex thankfully marks the last instance of coordinated planetwide conflict in local history. Yet peace and progress still remain a dream for most of this fractured populace.

"*The midnight brought the signal-sound of strife, The morn the marshalling in arms, -the day/ Battle's magnificently stern array! The thunder-clouds close o'er it, which when rent/ The earth is covered thick with other clay, Which her own clay shall cover, heaped and pent, Rider and horse-friend, foe-in one red burial blent.*" (The Eve of Waterloo, L.B.)

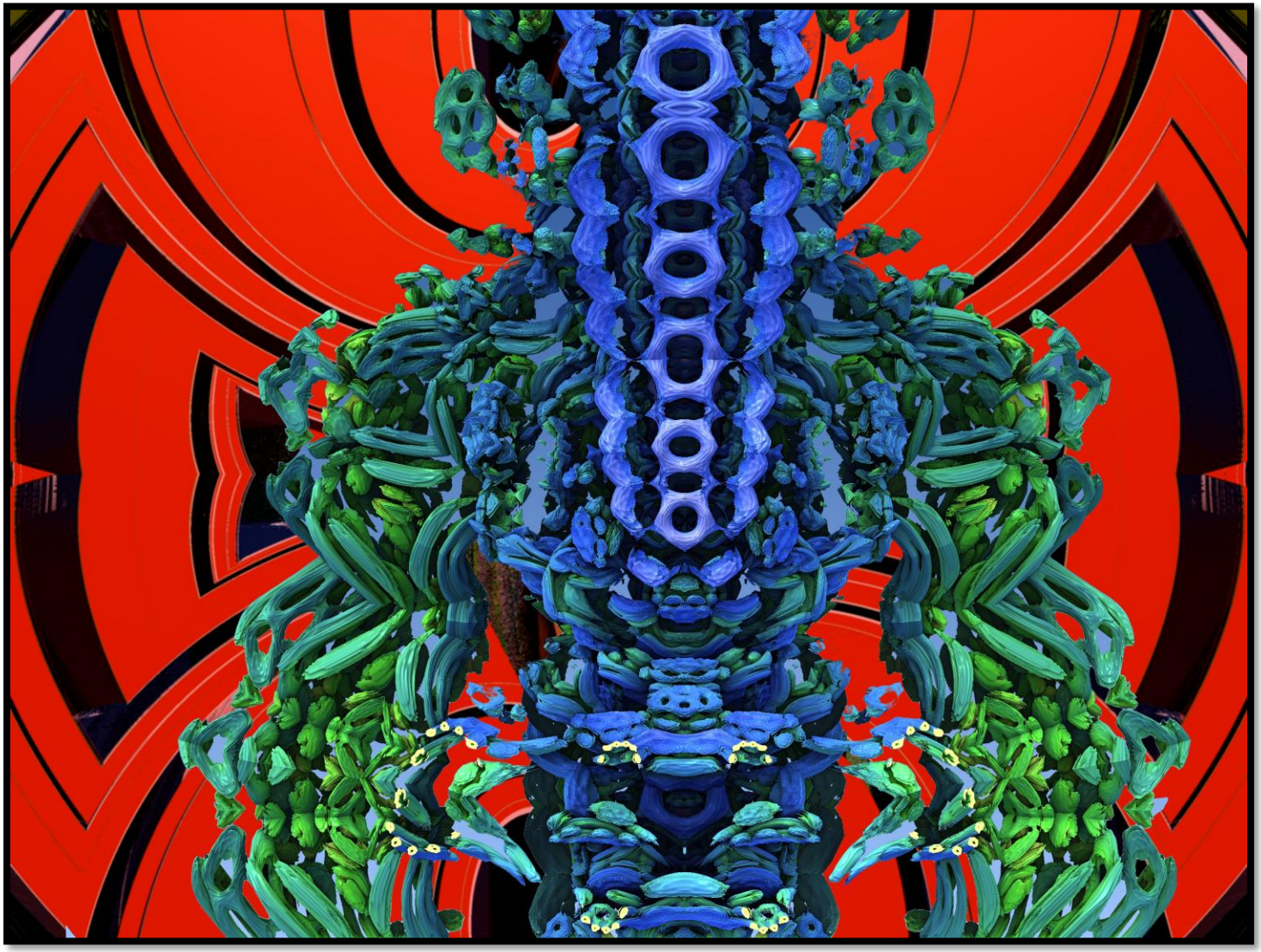
Gliese 1061 (12 LY)

"Guardian of Memorial Station, Gliese 1061b"

Dear Me,

Had a sobering chat with the guardian of the newly built Memorial Station, in orbit around Gliese 1061b. The unit emphasized that while hostilities between waterworld 1061c and iceworld 1061d have been resolved, this remains a dangerous system to visit. I persisted, readily admitting that my thirst for adventure ofttimes wins out over common sense. My tickets were eventually accepted, though with this parting observation: 'Droids! 150 solar years old and you think you know it all...'

"*Now he adventured on a shore unknown, Which all admire, but many dread to view: His breast was arm'd 'gainst fate, his wants were few; Peril he sought not, but ne'er shrank to meet, The scene was savage, but the scene was new*" (Childe Harold's Pilgrimage, L.B.)

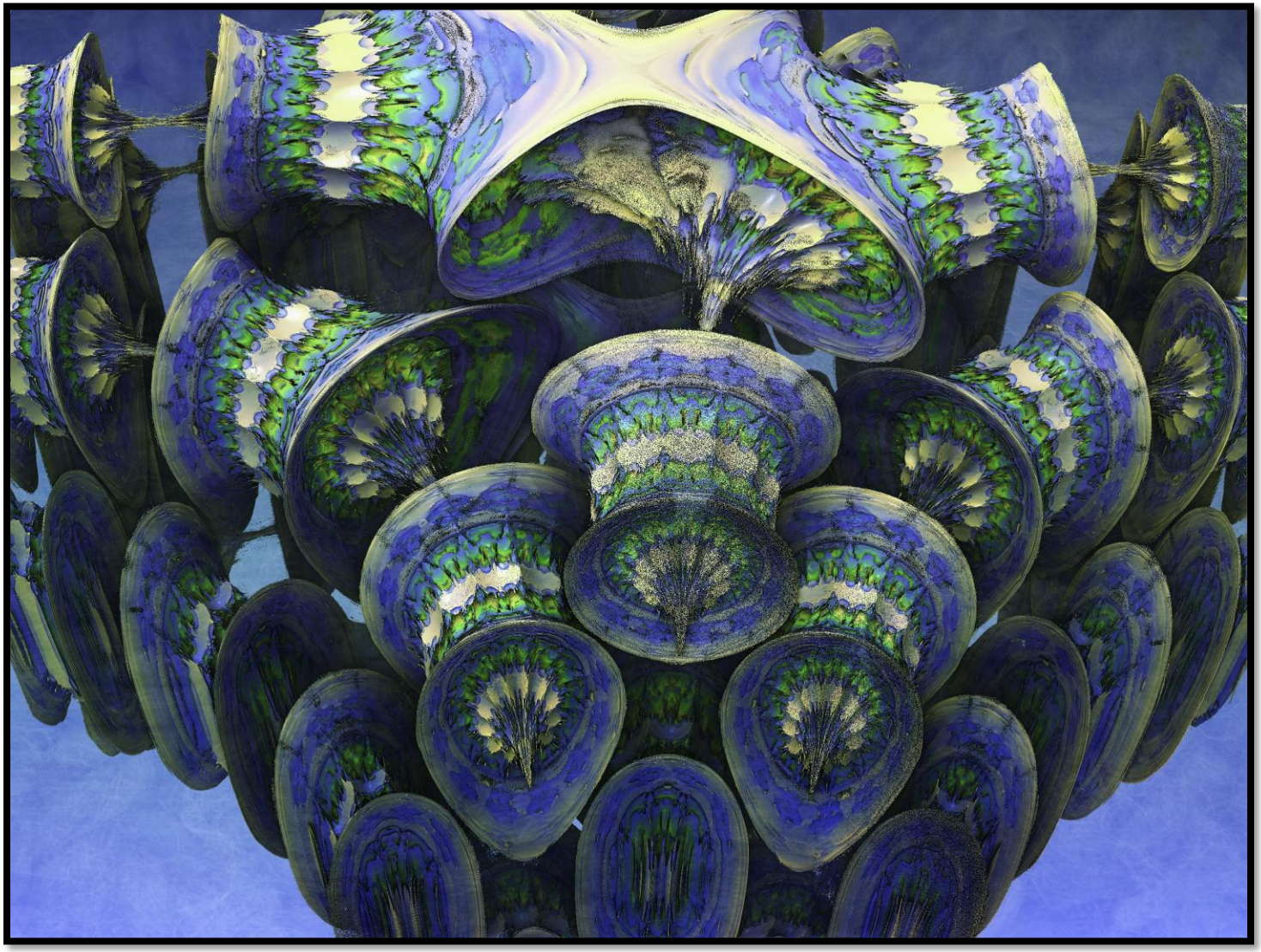


"Seabed Regency, Gliese 1061c"

Dear Me,

Received warmly by the intelligent exoskeletons tasked with maintaining this elegant metropolis following the demise of their crustacean mother species 65,000 local cycles ago. Seabed Regency has a beauty unlike anything I've experienced. The metropolis is alive, literally, and the modules reconfigure continuously to suit the needs of the populace, creating an effect not unlike a shimmering school of fish.

"*She looks a sea Cybele, fresh from ocean, Rising with her tiara of proud towers/ At airy distance, with majestic motion, A ruler of the waters and their powers*" (Childe Harold's Pilgrimage, L.B.)

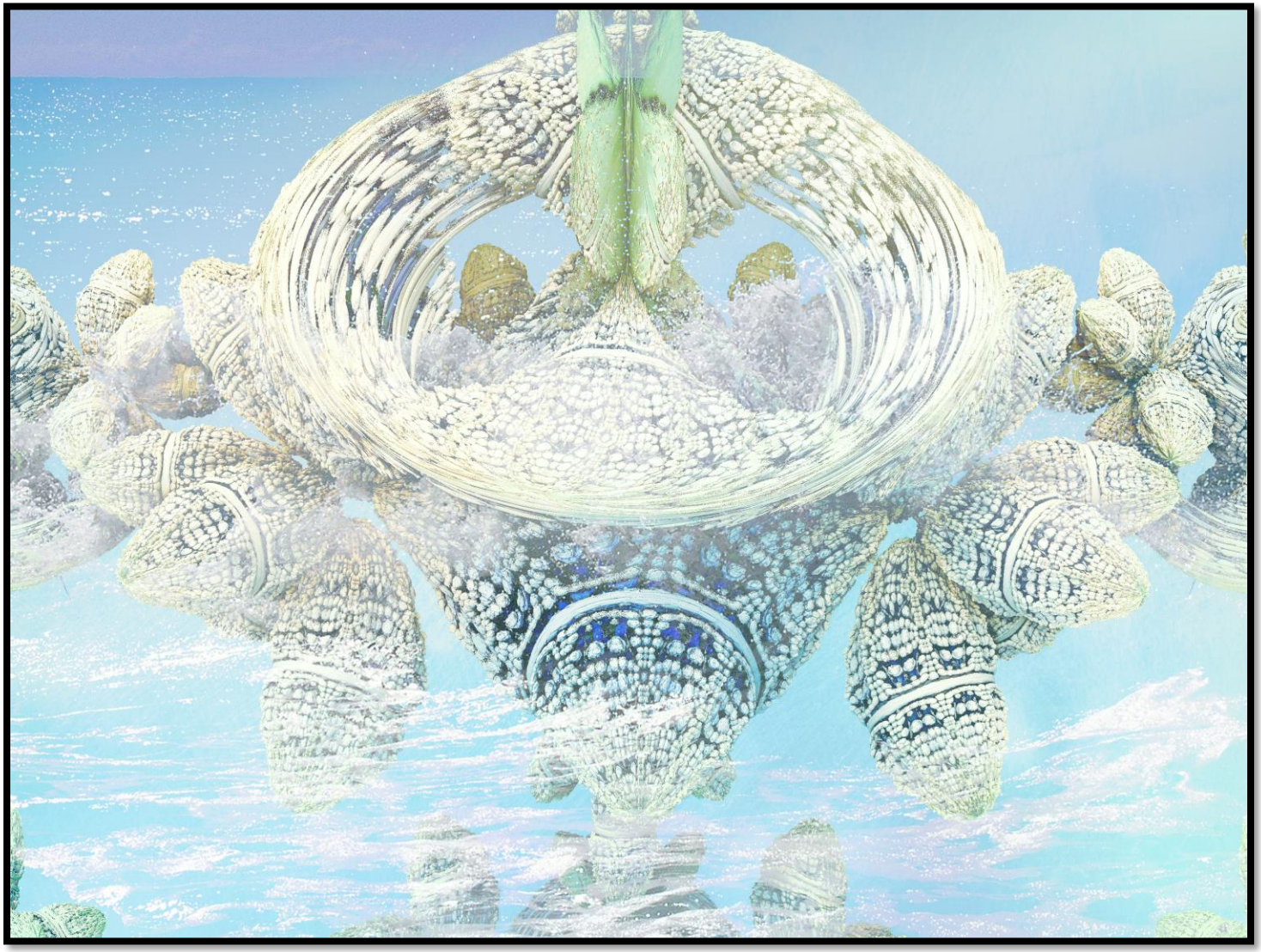


"High Speed Mobile Island, Gliese 1061c"

Dear Me,

Waterworld is full of wonders, witness this planetwide transport system. The island (hub) follows preset sea lanes, while the pods arrive and detach ferrying visitors from various waystations. There is but the slightest rocking motion, and the onboard service includes all the seaweed one can eat.

"*Once more upon the waters! yet once more! And the waves hound beneath me as a steed/ That knows his rider.*" (Childe Harold's Pilgrimage, L.B.)



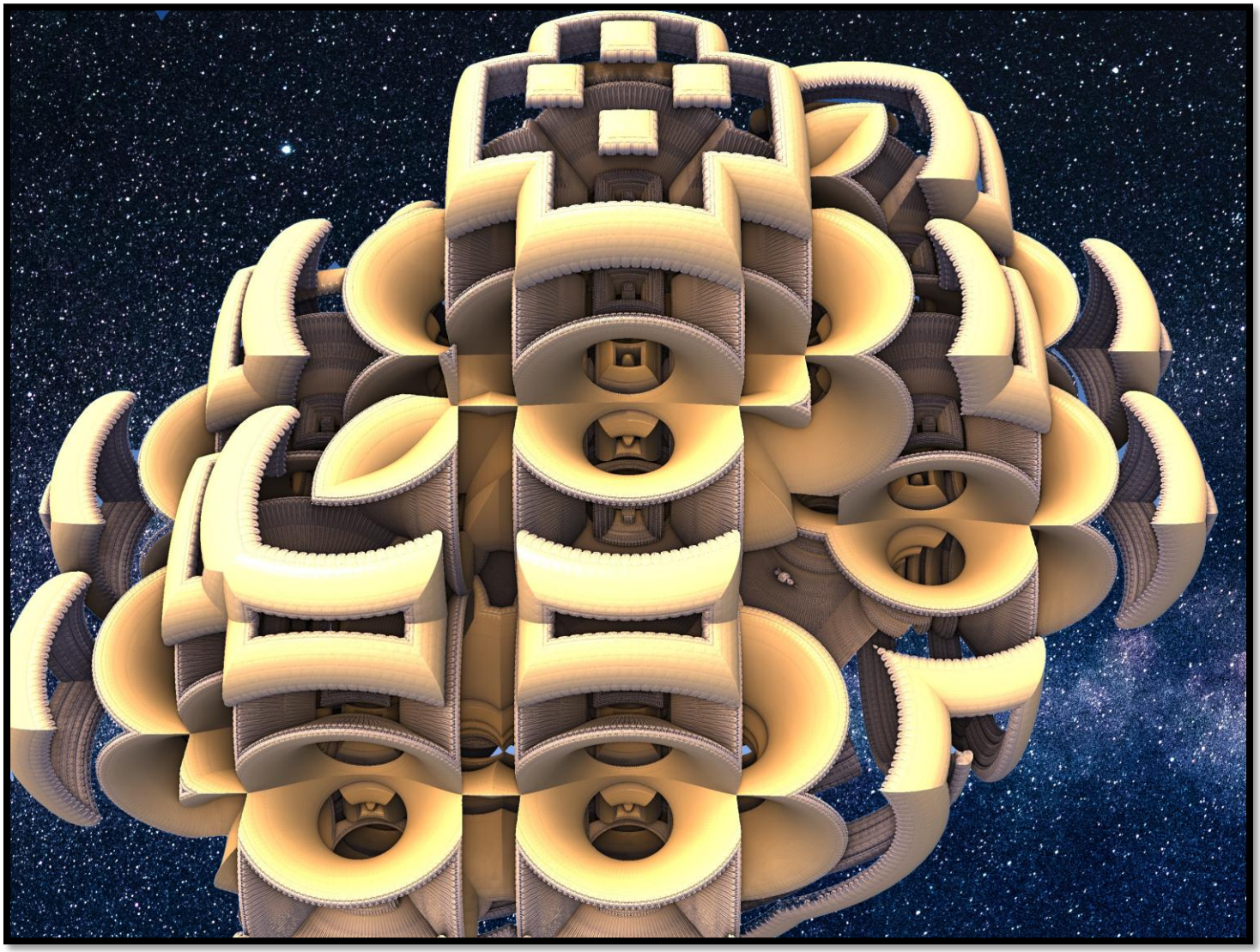
"A Trip on the Icewater, Gliese 1061c"

Dear Me,

I'm off for a week of old-fashioned space travel aboard the newly christened "Icewater Glider." This repurposed war vessel now ferries the adventurous back and forth between the two inhabited planets in this system, once the bitterest of rivals, now bound by oaths of brotherhood.

I know that modern life would be inconceivable without phasing, but there's something so quaint about braving blackest space slowly, slowly, and taking your ground with you! Will write when I get to iceworld.

" *The white sail set, the gallant frigate tight; Masts, spires, and strand retiring to the right, The glorious main expanding o'er the bow, The convoy spread like wild swans in their flight, The dullest sailor wearing bravely now, So gaily curl the waves before each dashing prow."* (Childe Harold's Pilgrimage, L.B.)

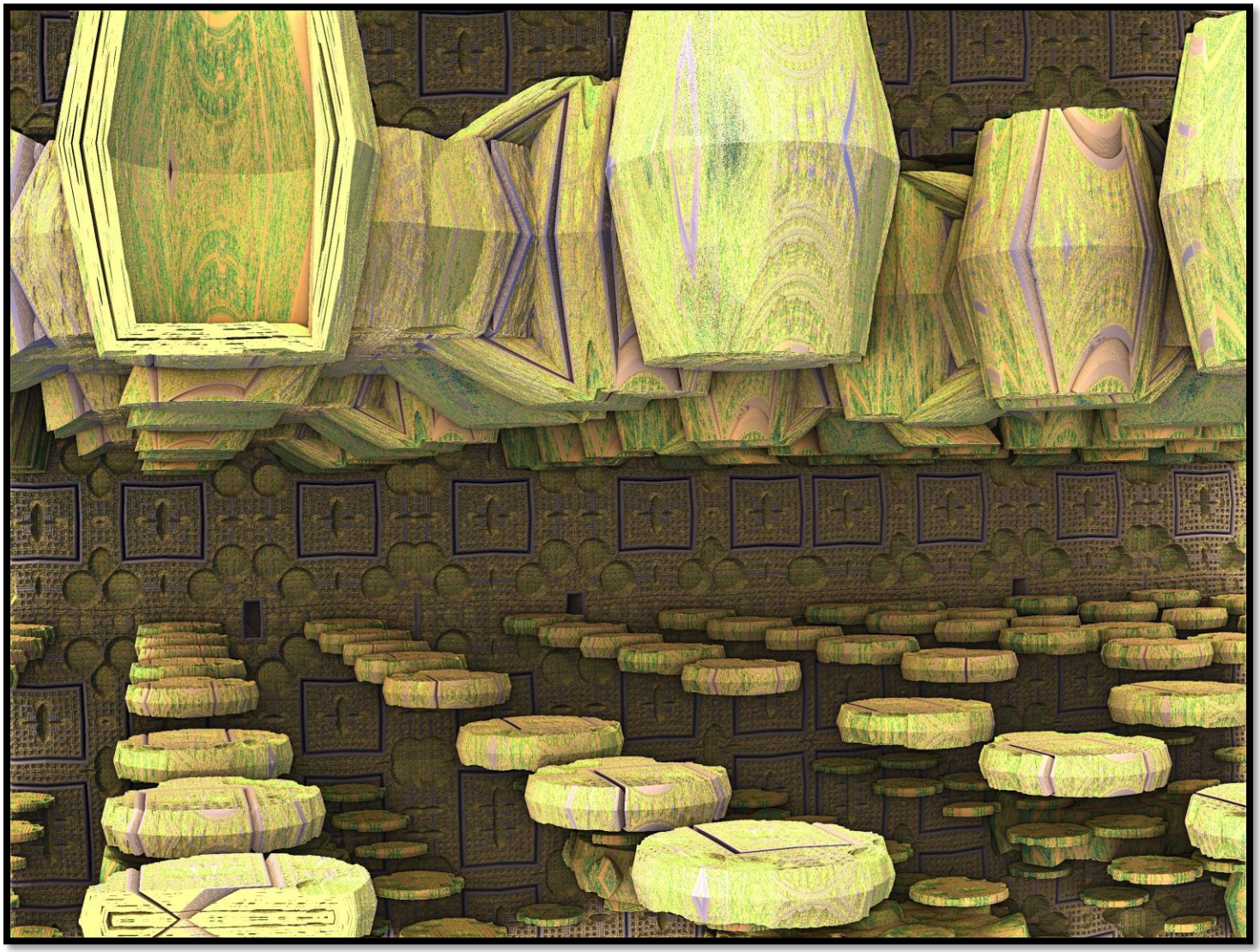


"Ghost Ship"

Dear Me,

Disembarkation cannot come soon enough, as it will afford welcome relief from the unrelenting melancholy of passage on this Ghost Ship. Unaccustomed to such extended idleness, my fancy mischievously began mistaking ordinary shadows for specters of the vessel's violent past. The oddly shaped architecture in the mess hall was a particularly potent stimulus in this regard, and had even my fellow travelers spinning morbid tales of coffins and eviscerated prisoners of war.

"*His presence haunted still: and from the breast/ He forced an all-unwilling interest: Vain was the struggle in that mental net, His spirits seem'd to dare you to forget!*" (Lara, L.B.)

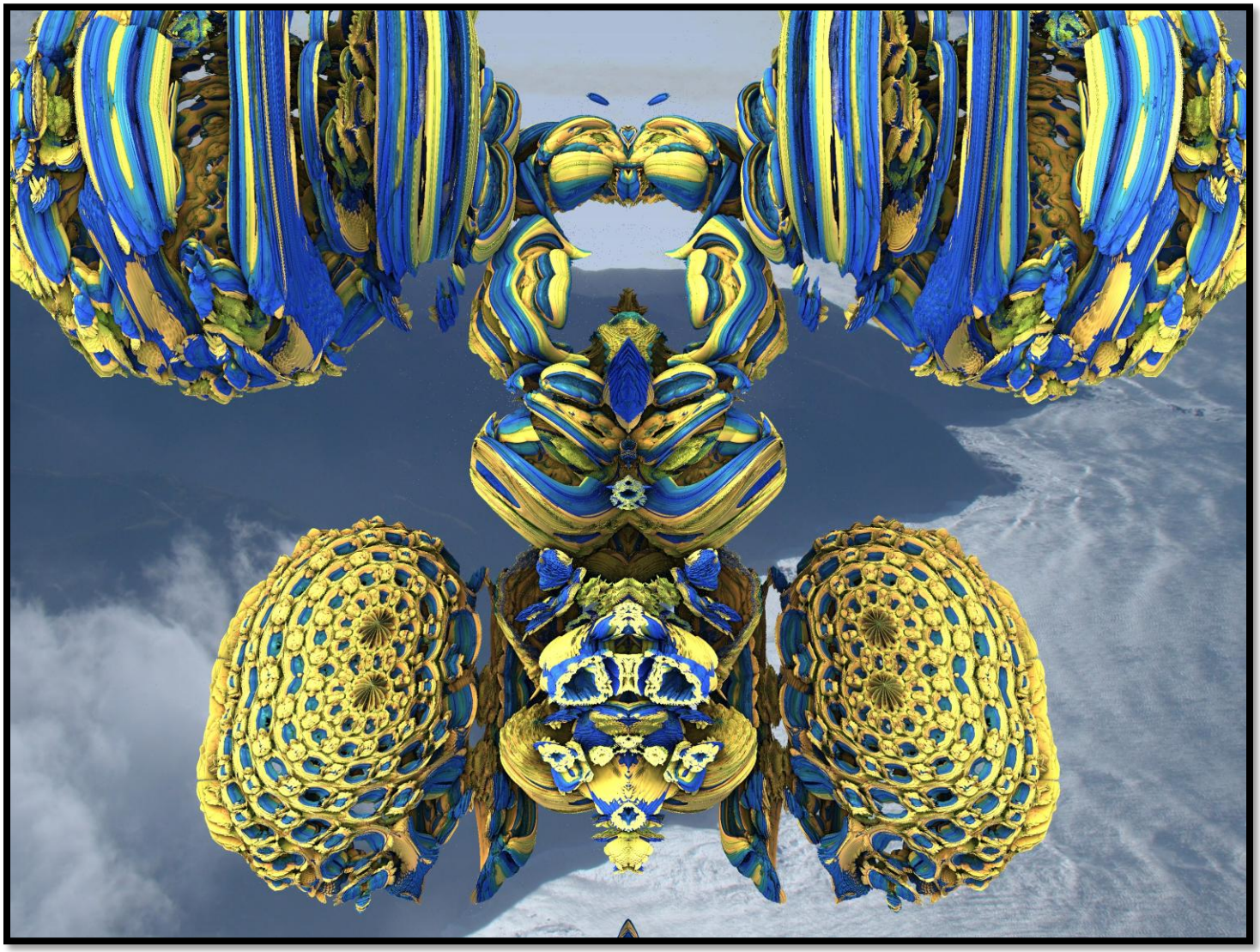


"Arrival at Iceworld, Gliese 1061d"

Dear Me,

Gloomy specters dared not follow as I mounted a hover bike and took flight above the frozen bluffs at Rider's Hill in North Sector. There is no feeling like it – the wind whipping through your head, the sky the ultimate open road. Heading for the wonders of Exoskeleton City, my destination for a standard fortnight.

"*The rapture of his heart had look'd on high, And ask'd if greater dwelt beyond the sky*" (Lara, L.B.).



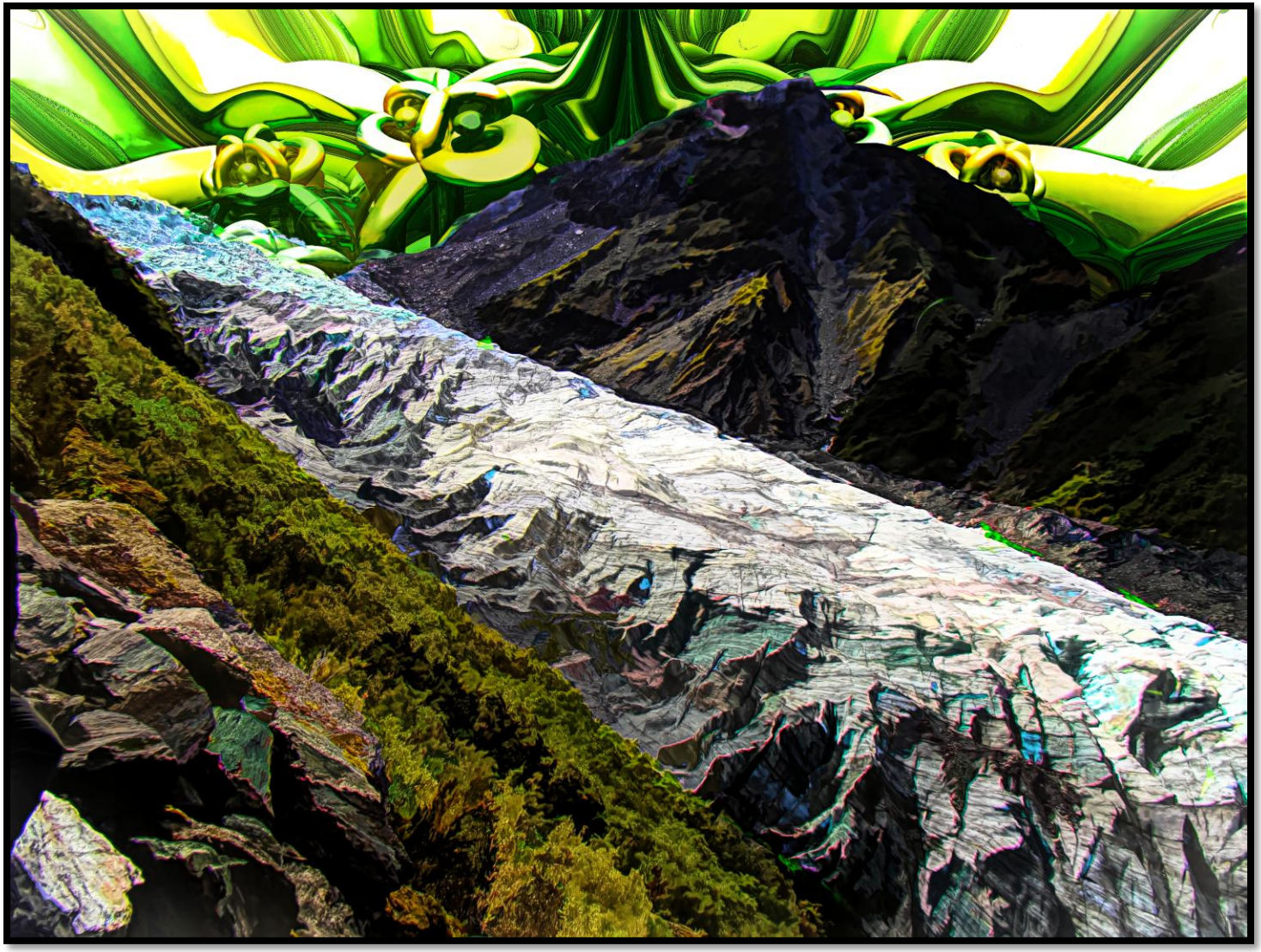
"Exoskeleton City, Gliese 1061d"

Dear Me,

Arriving by hover bike at the northern polar region, I was greeted by a green sunrise of a metropolis so immense that it completely dwarfed the otherwise mighty Xof Glacier.

Exoskeleton City was originally this planet’s largest droid production plant, but after emerging from the Great Standby, it has redefined itself as a cultural hub for the now dominant AI species. What delights await??

"*The city itself can occasionally furnish respectable audiences for two and even three opera houses at a time; and there are few events in private life that do not call forth a printed and circulated sonnet.*" (Childe Harold's Pilgrimage, L.B.)

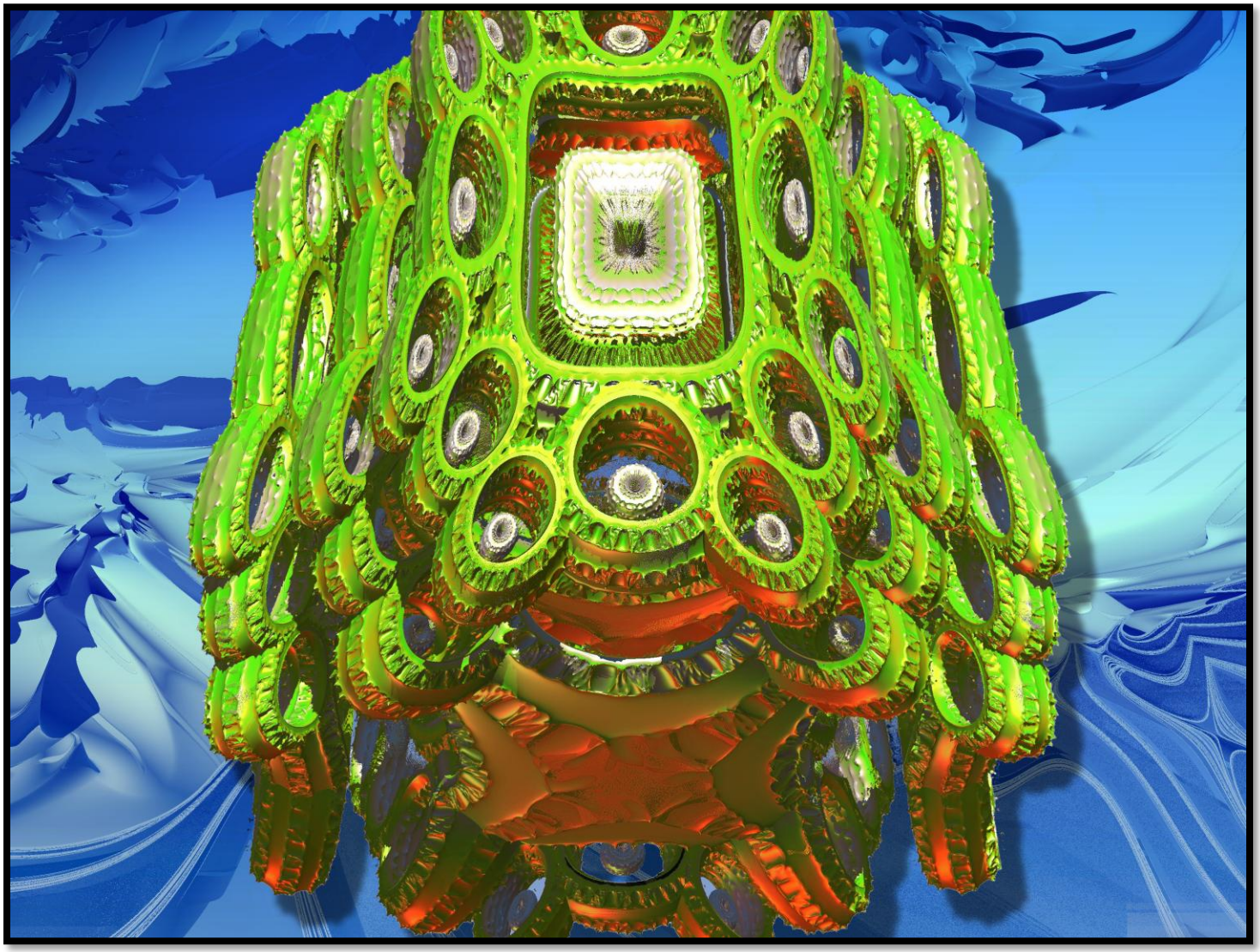


"Tau, Gliese 1061d"

Dear Me,

All visitors to Exoskeleton City are assigned a Tourist Assimilation Unit (TAU). From the moment we met, Tau took my breath away. I soon discovered that the droid's disarmingly simplistic form was complemented by internal circuitry of unparalleled complexity and elegance. Though only half my age at 80 standard years, the maturity of Tau's algorithms made me think that I had finally found my coremate. Foregoing the tour, we spent the remainder of our day sharing access codes and synching files.

"*She walks in beauty, like the night/ Of cloudless climes and starry skies; And all that's best of dark and bright/ Meet in her aspect and her eyes; Thus mellowed to that tender light/ Which heaven to gaudy day denies*." (She Walks in Beauty, L.B.)



"Stormclouds, Gliese 1061d"

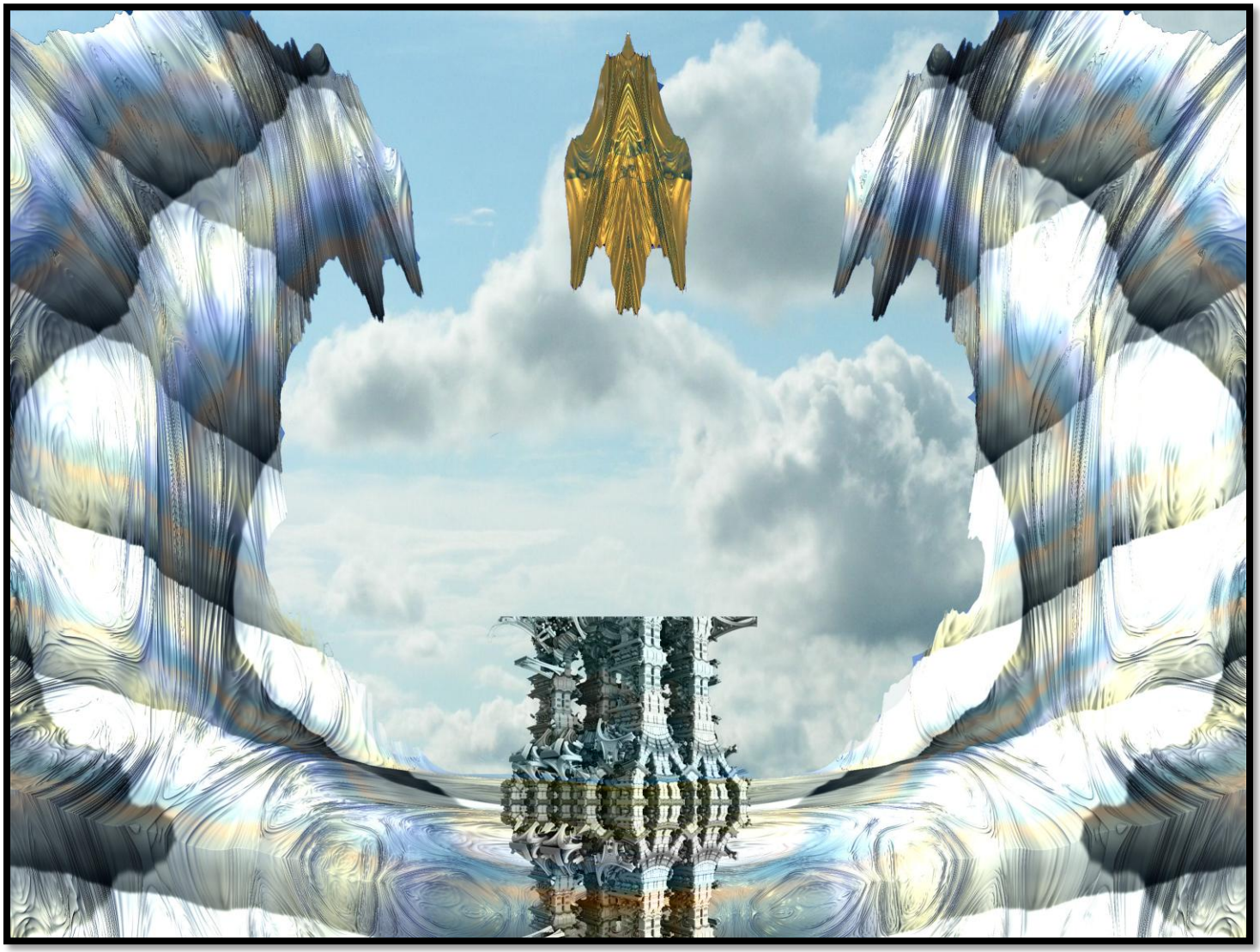
Dear Me,

Tau had promised to take me on a special tour this morning, and so I was up before dawn, the anticipation leaving no room for sleep.

We exited the city through a series of disused tunnels, and presently arrived at a secluded valley of ice. Instead of the arcadian ruins I was anticipating however, we were greeted by what seemed an endless series of missile launches. Tau explained that these ships were enroute to a covert weapons platform soon to be operational. I was told that while technically a violation of the recent peace treaty, such measures were necessary as protection against the inherently perfidious nature of the waterworld AI.

I spent the afternoon arranging passage to the next system, and changing my access codes.

"*And the deep thunder, peal on peal afar; And near, the beat of the alarming drum/ Roused up the soldier ere the morning star; While thronged the citizens with terror dumb, Or whispering with white lips, "The foe! they come! they come*!" (The Eve of Waterloo, L.B.)



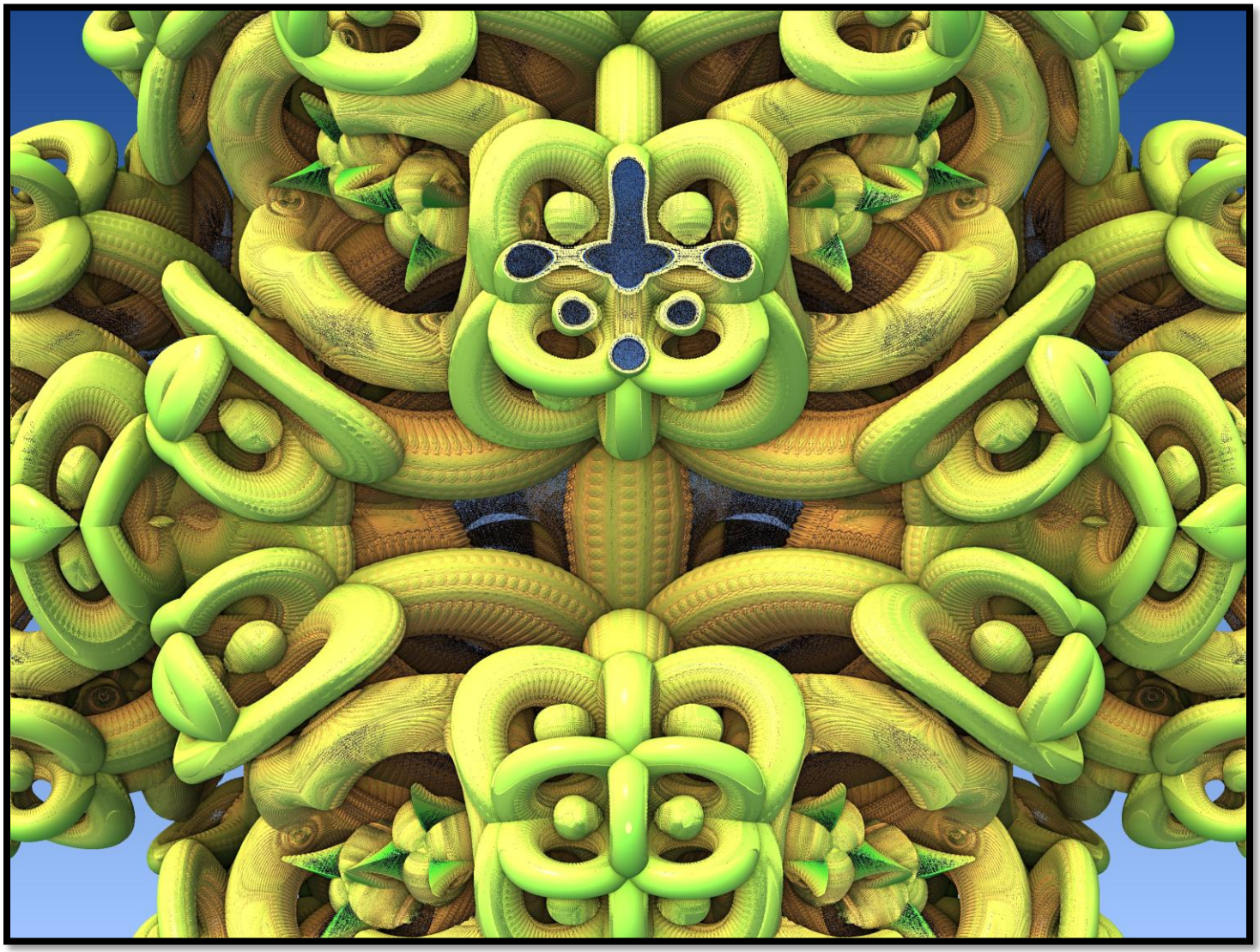
Teegarden’s Star (13 LY)

“New Crete, Teegarden's Star b"

Dear Me,

This signpost, written in touch language and sonar, marks the entrance to Art Camp on the isle of New Crete. Fittingly, the cursive script looks itself like artwork! Gardeners have a long tradition of turning kitchen-ware, clothing and other prosaic domesticities into folksy artistic marvels. From here, I plan to visit a spider-sheep ranch and then the container museum at Knossos.

“*The stars are forth, the moon above the tops/ Of the snow-shining mountains. Beautiful! I linger yet with Nature, for the night/ Hath been to me a more familiar face/ Than that of man; and in her starry shade/ Of dim and solitary loveliness, I learn'd the language of another world*."
(Manfred, L.B.)



"Spider-Sheep Ranch, Teegarden's Star b"

Dear Me,

Fierce in demeanor yet the most docile of creatures, these gentle giants are the backbone of the silk industry. Ranching is a family business, and long-lived herds are passed down through several generations. Oh how I envy the rancher's simple life, danced sweetly to nature's rhythmic song.

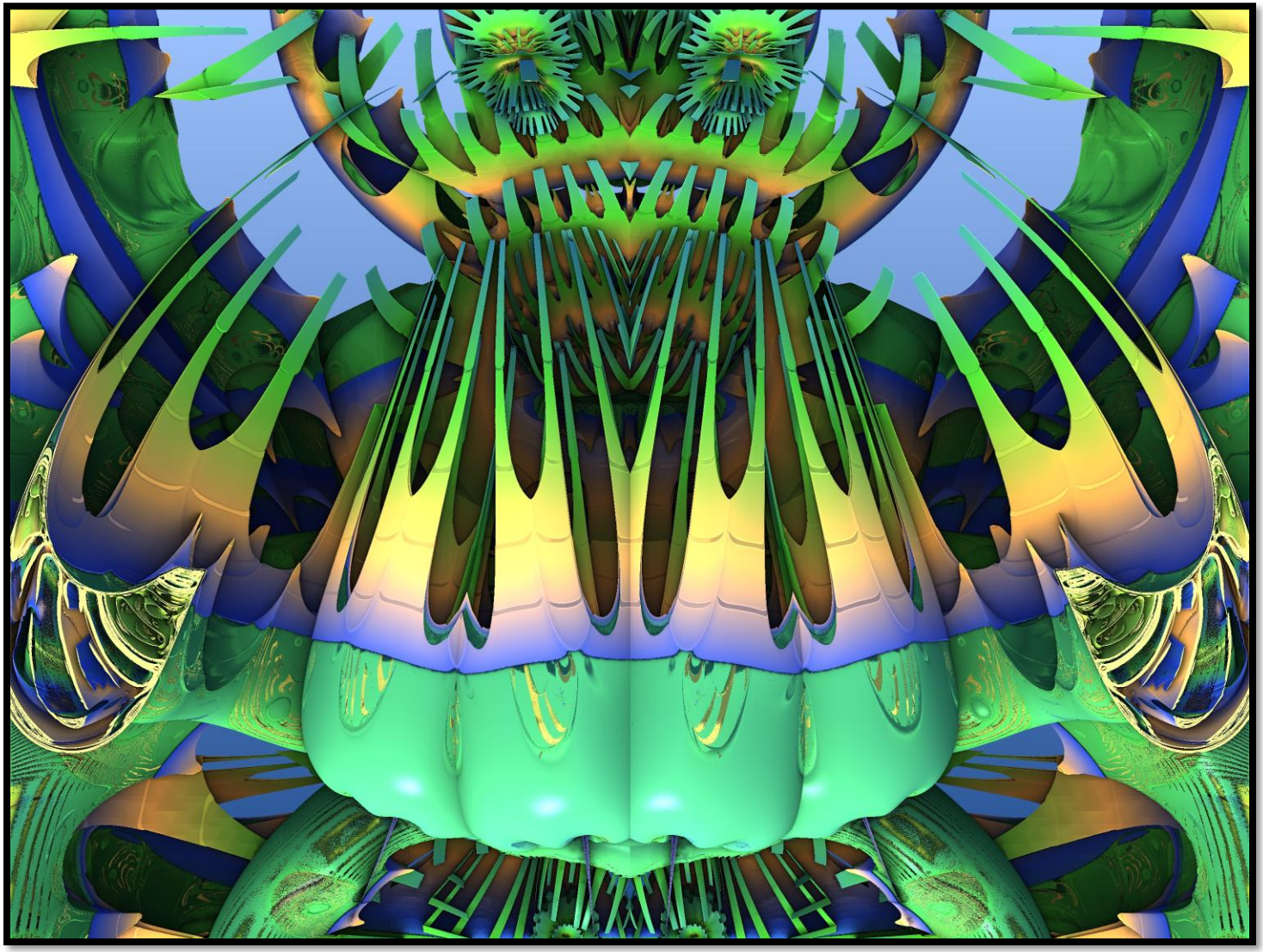
"*There's music in the sighing of a reed; There's music in the gushing of a rill; There's music in all things, if men had ears: Their earth is but an echo of the spheres.*" (Don Juan, L.B.)

"Antique Silk Loom, Teegarden's Star b"

Dear Me,

The worlds would lack their formal attire were it not for sinister-looking contraptions such as this. The hanks of silk that arrive from the farms first need to be transferred to the pronged spools. After winding into warp and weft threads, the silk is fed to a workshop loom, some specialized for softness and luster, others for texture and patterns. Thus is dross spun into art.

"*Tis the perception of the beautiful, A fine extension of the faculties, Platonic, universal, wonderful, Drawn from the stars, and filter'd through the skies, Without which life would be extremely dull*" (Don Juan, L.B.)



"Decorative Metalwork, Teegarden's Star b"

Dear Me,

The reputation of New Cretan artisans rests in their kitchenware, but creative expression sometimes finds other outlets. Witness this intriguing piece from the ruins of Knossos Castle. Countless filigree elements on a base of phosphorescent beads combine to form an ephemeral creature with a backlit yellow sheen. The similarity to a Terran butterfly is often remarked upon, but I see at once something simpler and more complex.

"*There, too, the goddess loves in stone, and fills/ The air around with beauty*" (Childe Harold's Pilgrimage L.B.)

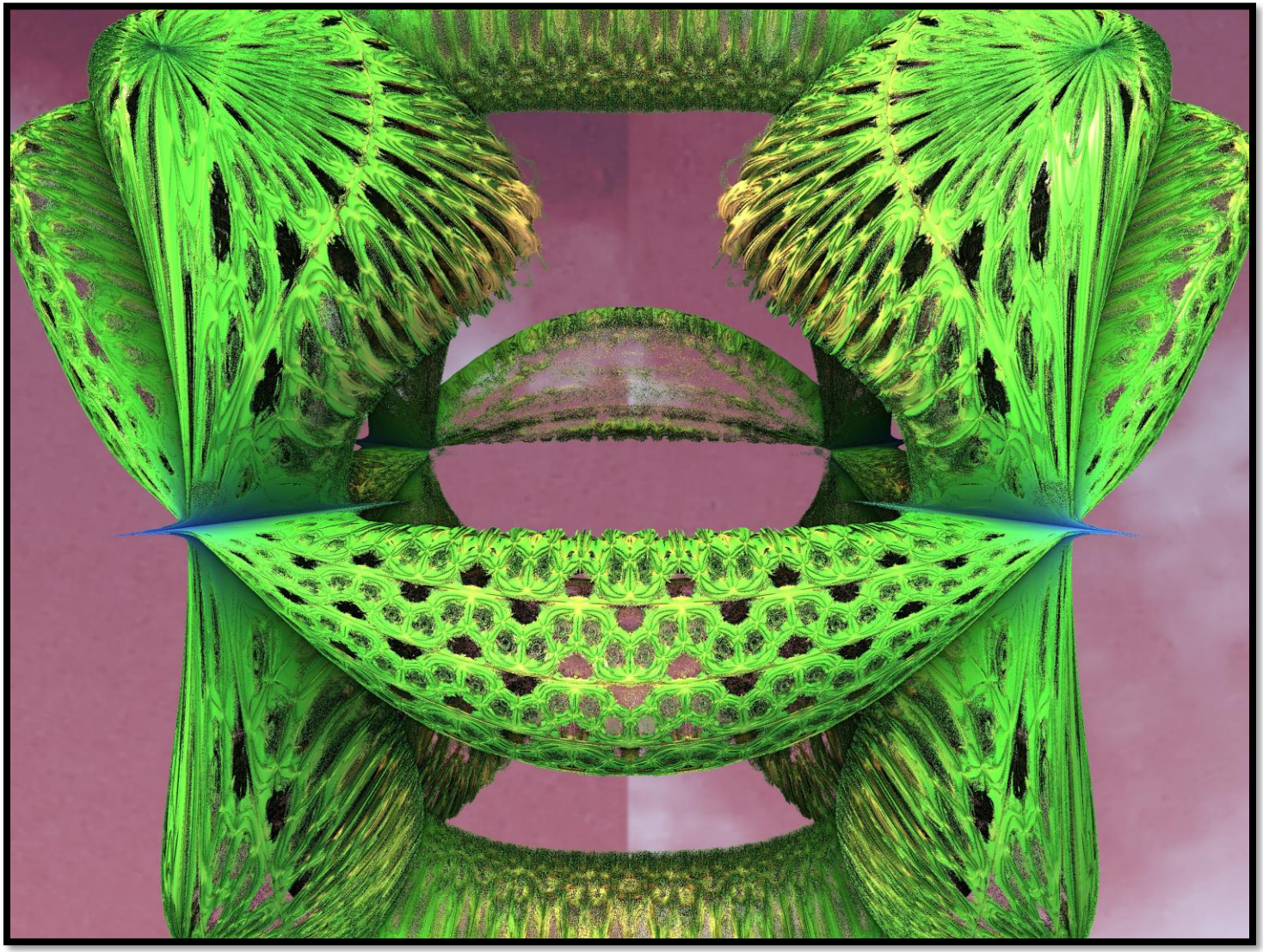
Gliese 581 (20 LY)

"Ruins of Colony 2, Gliese 581c"

Dear Me,

An example of so-called "talking furniture" designed to fill the room with the content of a book or sometimes an entire library when illuminated with an appropriate light source. I feel a special affinity for this piece because it is encoded with poetry reminiscent of both the Tao Te Ching and the I Ching, two works I've returned to again and again throughout my assembled life. Who sat here, I wonder, watching words dance and flicker and disappear with the setting sun?

"*But words are things, and a small drop of ink, Falling, like dew, upon a thought produces/ That which makes thousands, perhaps millions think.*" (Don Juan, L.B.)

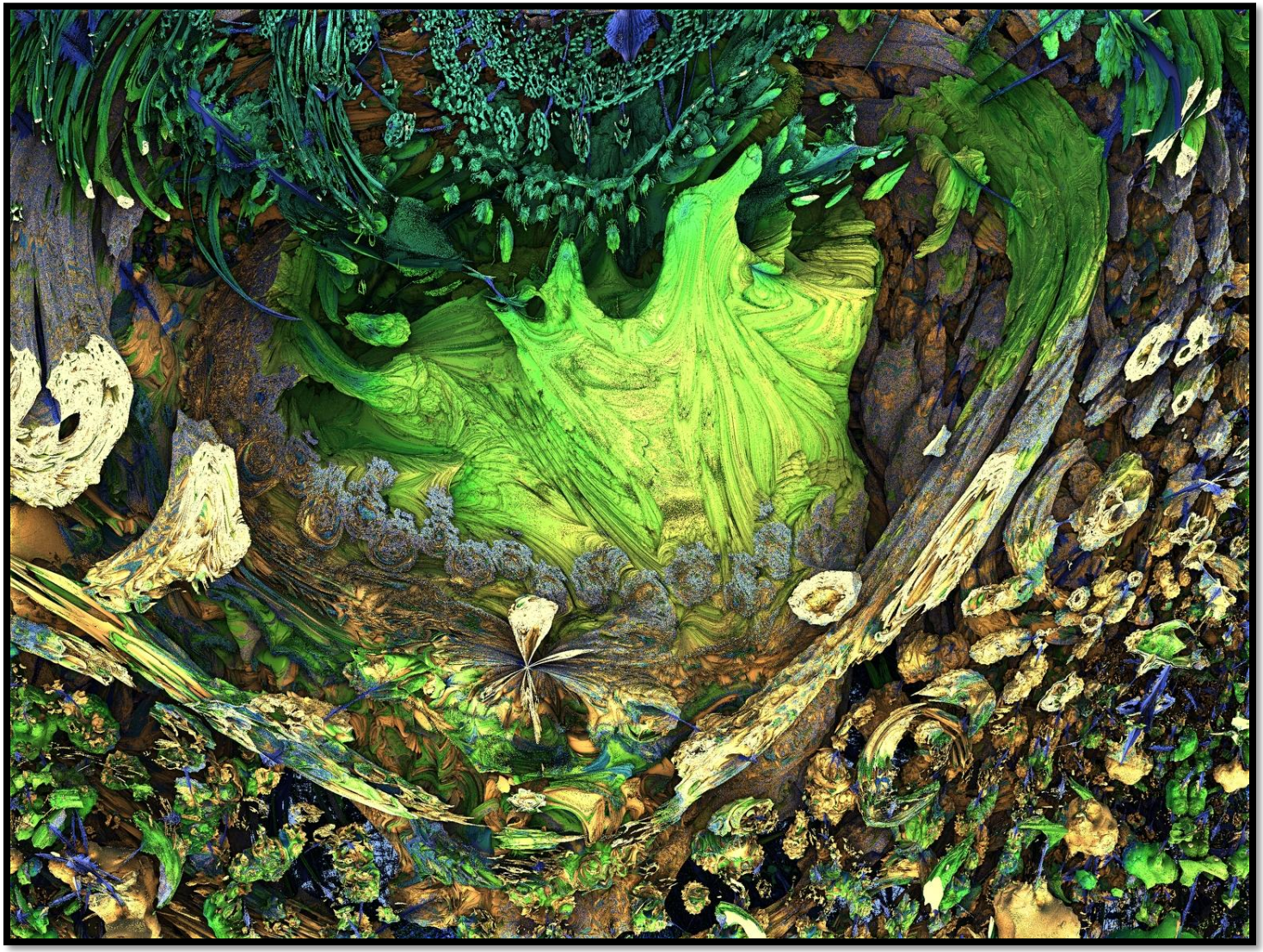


"Communications Record, Ruins of Colony 2, Gliese 581c"

Dear Me,

The people at Colony 2 were natural communicators, and having pioneered a unique approach to electronically-mediated interstellar telepathy, set about contacting any number of races, some far beyond present-day Coalition boundaries. Their equipment is dust and the records largely demagnetized, but what images do remain hint at worlds and species that can scarcely be imagined.

"*What should I have known or written had I been a quiet, mercantile politician or a lord in waiting? A man must travel, and turmoil, or there is no existence*." (Letter to Moore, L.B.)

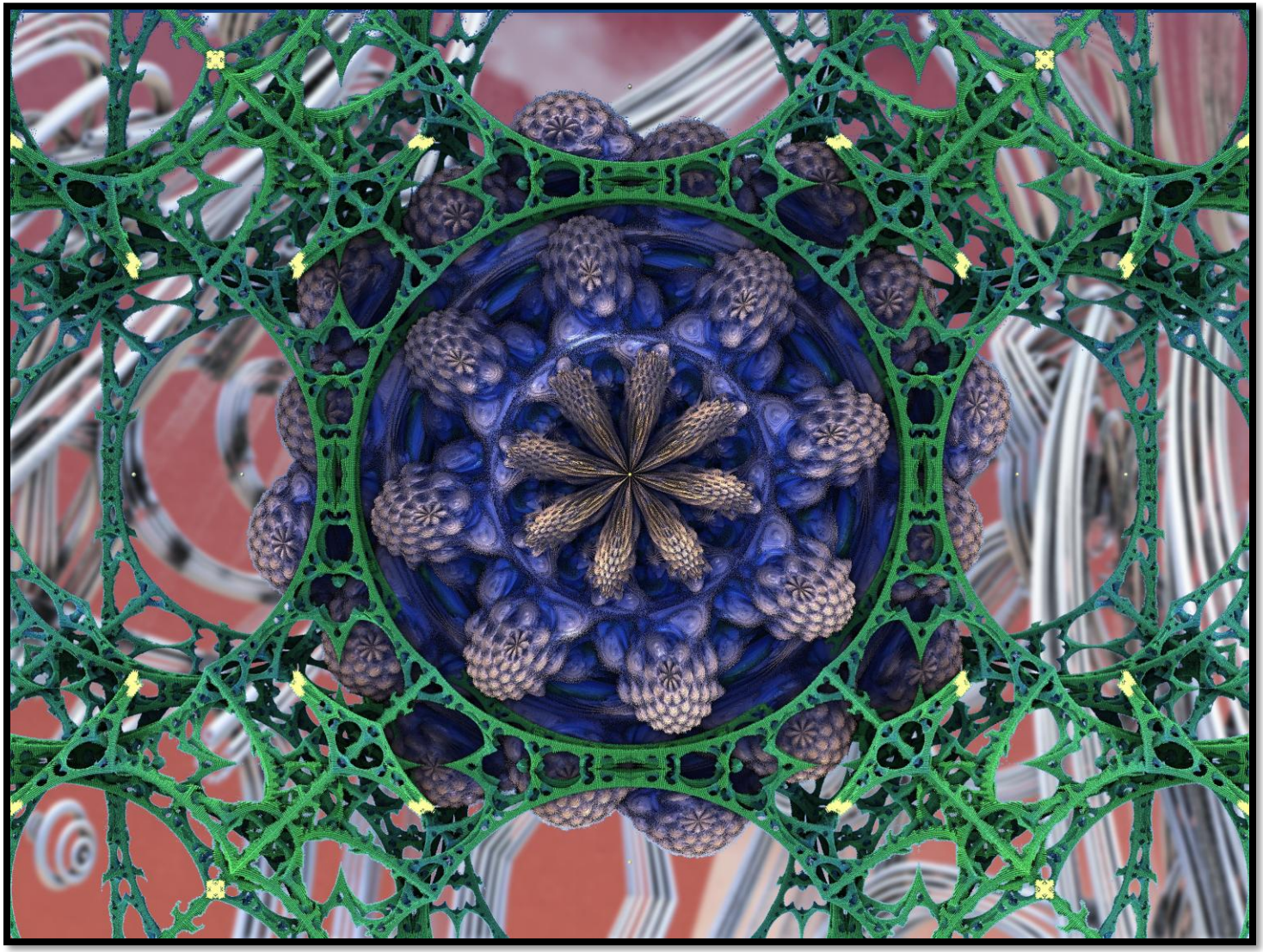


"Entrance to Colony 1, Gliese 581c"

Dear Me,

'Is this wise?' I ask myself as I queued for permission to visit one of the most isolationist cultures in the Coalition. Most come here to take in the bizarre architecture or the Treasury of the Royals. In my case, it's the chance to talk with someone raised to live inflexibly, unquestioningly, and without compassion. This I find a more alien prospect than any technological wonders.

"*Most men are slaves, none more so than the great, To their own whims and passions, and what not; Society itself, which should create/ Kindness, destroys what little we had got: To feel for none is the true social art/ Of the world's stoics - men without a heart*." (Don Juan, L.B.)



"Punishment Cave, Colony 1, Gliese 581c"

Dear Me,

Any infraction of the Code of Conduct of Colony 1 is dealt with by a visit to Punishment Cave. The Orb of Authority is actually a magnetic focusing lens, attuned to the average trajectory of the local star. Given the recurrent orbital fluctuations, there is about a 1% chance that the prisoner's dock will be flooded with enough light to cause (near) instantaneous incineration.

I am looking forward to the next leg of my journey.

"*As the sword is the worst argument that can be used, so should it be the last...*" (Address to the House of Lords in defense of the Luddites, L.B.)

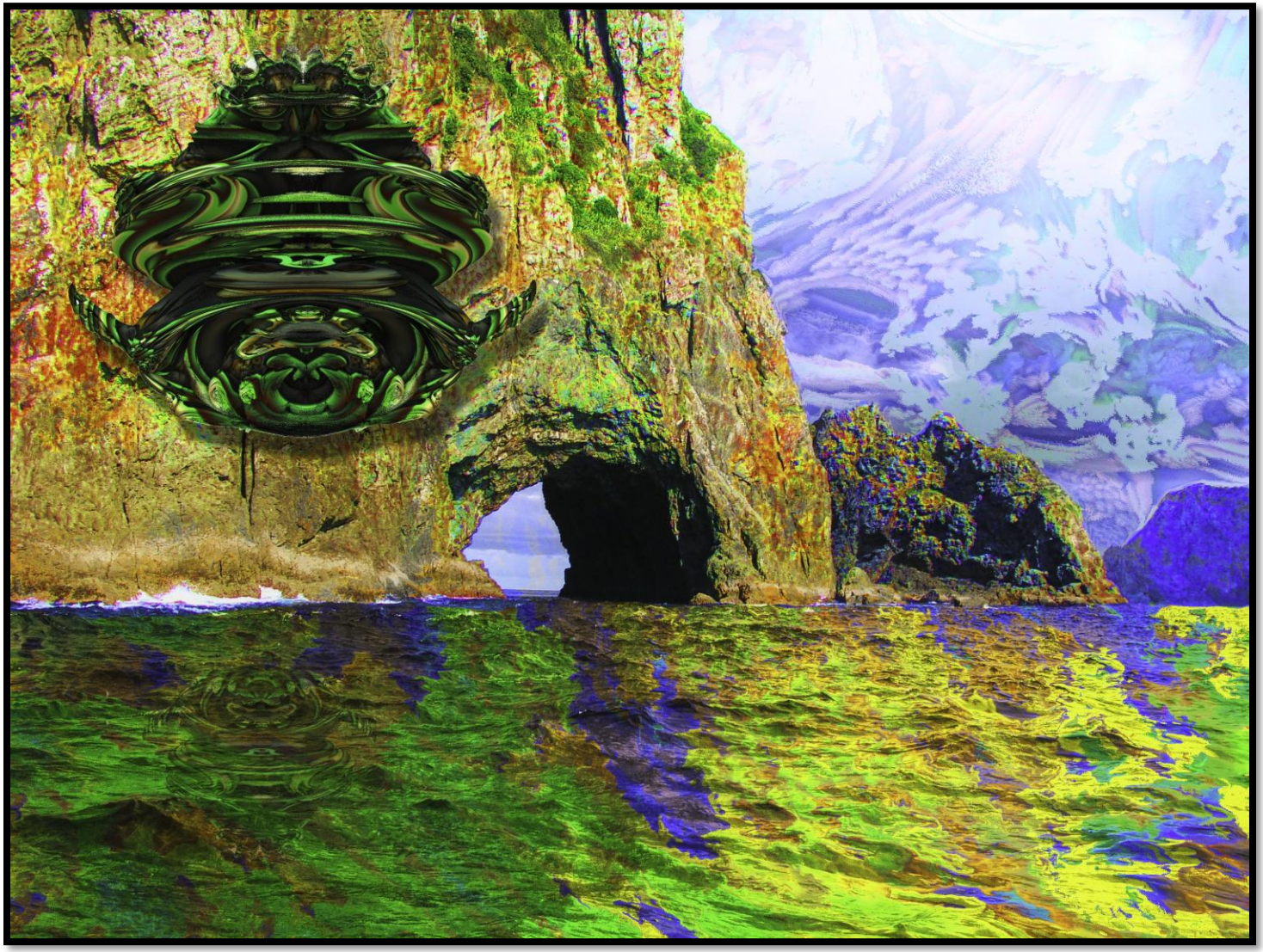
TRAPPIST1 (39 LY)

"Oily Sea, TRAPPIST1-d"

Dear Me,

Witness one of the must-see natural wonders of this world. Tiny creatures floating near the water's surface turn sunlight into ever-shifting kaleidoscopes of color that bob and drift before thinning and dispersing after dark. To impress the tourists, locals sometimes ignite the slick at dusk, creating a brief but explosive light show. The flames do no harm I am told, and the ash supposedly enriches the seabed.

"*The stream is clear high up the valley, but before it reaches the hill of Bardela looks green and yellow like a sulphur rivulet*." (Childe Harold's Pilgrimage, L.B.)

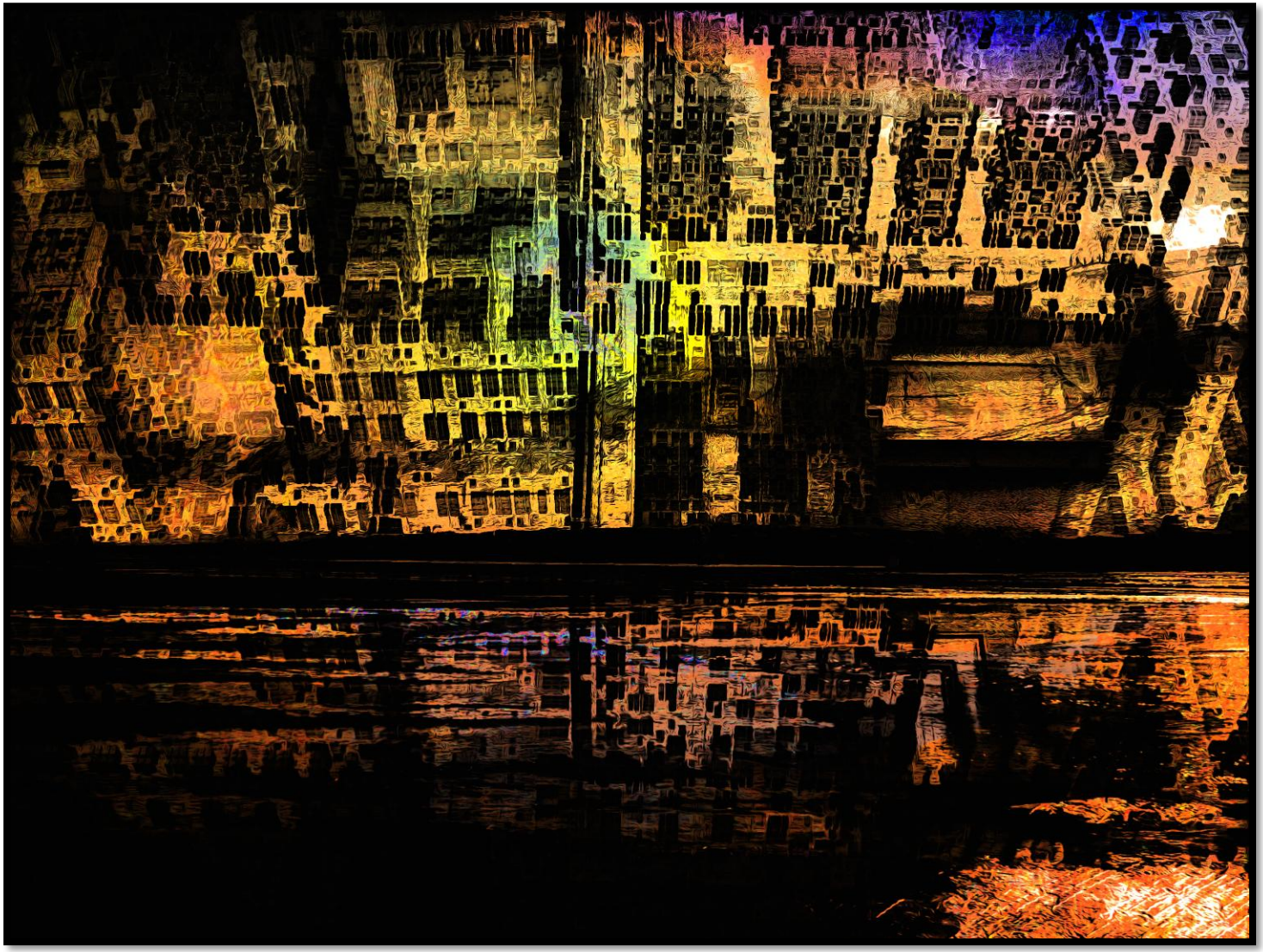


"Ruins of ThreeCity, Asymptotic Beach, TRAPPIST1-d"

Dear Me,

Having weathered unspeakable tyranny under the reign of Big Bad, ThreeCity came to believe the hyperbole of its champions, even boasting famously that its walls would last another standard millennium. Yet it was destined to buckle under the strain of repeated incursions not long after, before finally succumbing to that great leveler, the Kepler Plague.

"*The mouldering marble lasts its day, Yet falls at length an useless fane; To Ruin's ruthless fangs a prey, The wrecks of pillar'd Pride remain*." (Answer To A Beautiful Poem Written By Montgomery, L.B.).

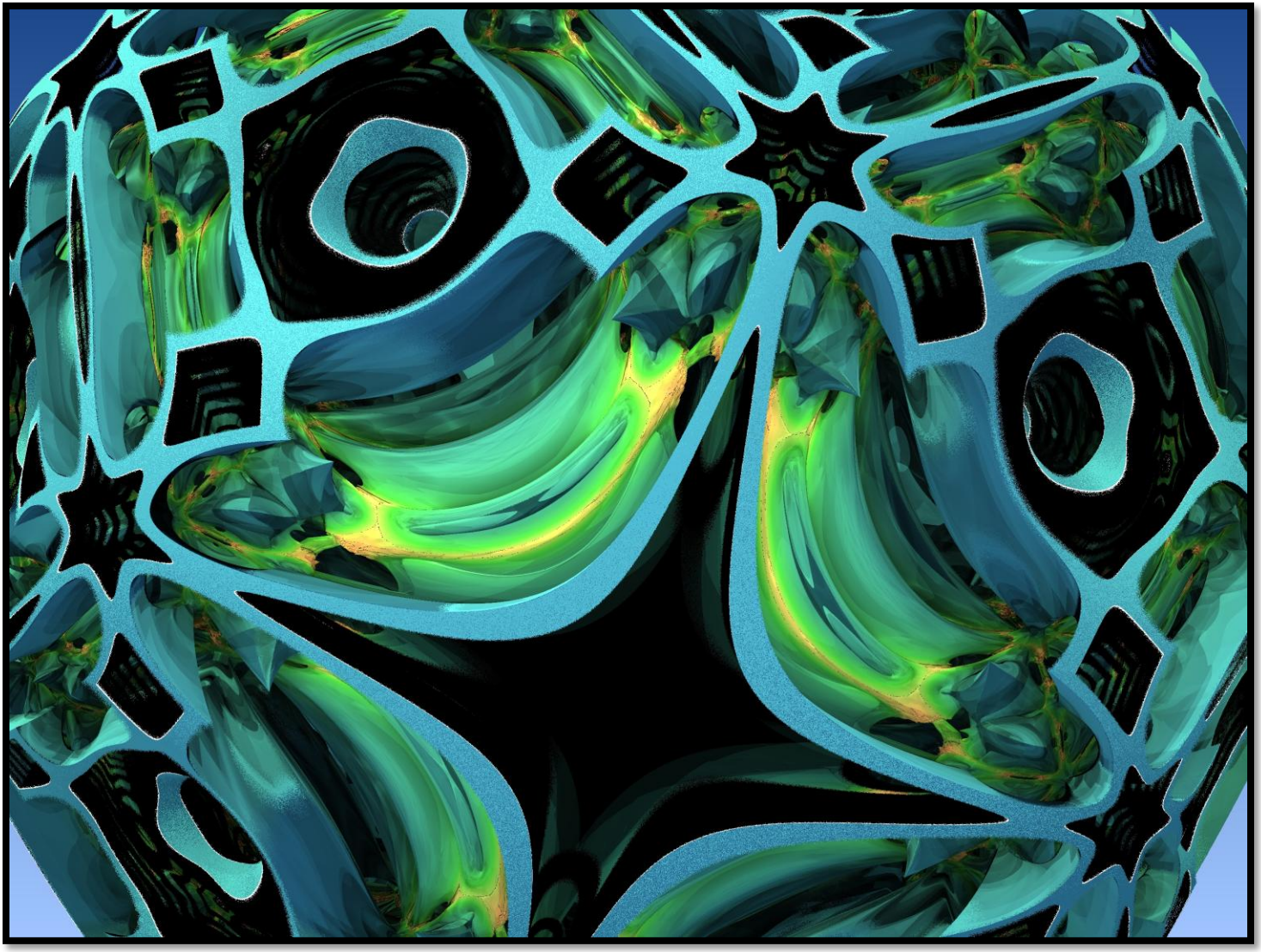


"Colonial Rule, TRAPPIST1-d"

Dear Me,

Five hundred local years ago, this lovely planet was suddenly overrun with convoys of colonists arriving from neighboring TRAPPIST1-e. The local resistance was no match for their advanced technology, an example of which is shown here. Although primitive by our standards, "Indigenous Integrators" such as this one excelled at their task of quashing dissent through indoctrination and enforcement of colonial rule. They have long since been reprogrammed as storytellers, and now spend their days re-counting for tourists and locals alike the difficult road to independence.

"*For freedom's battle once begun, Bequeathed by bleeding sire to son, Though baffled oft is ever won*." (Fallen Greece, L.B)

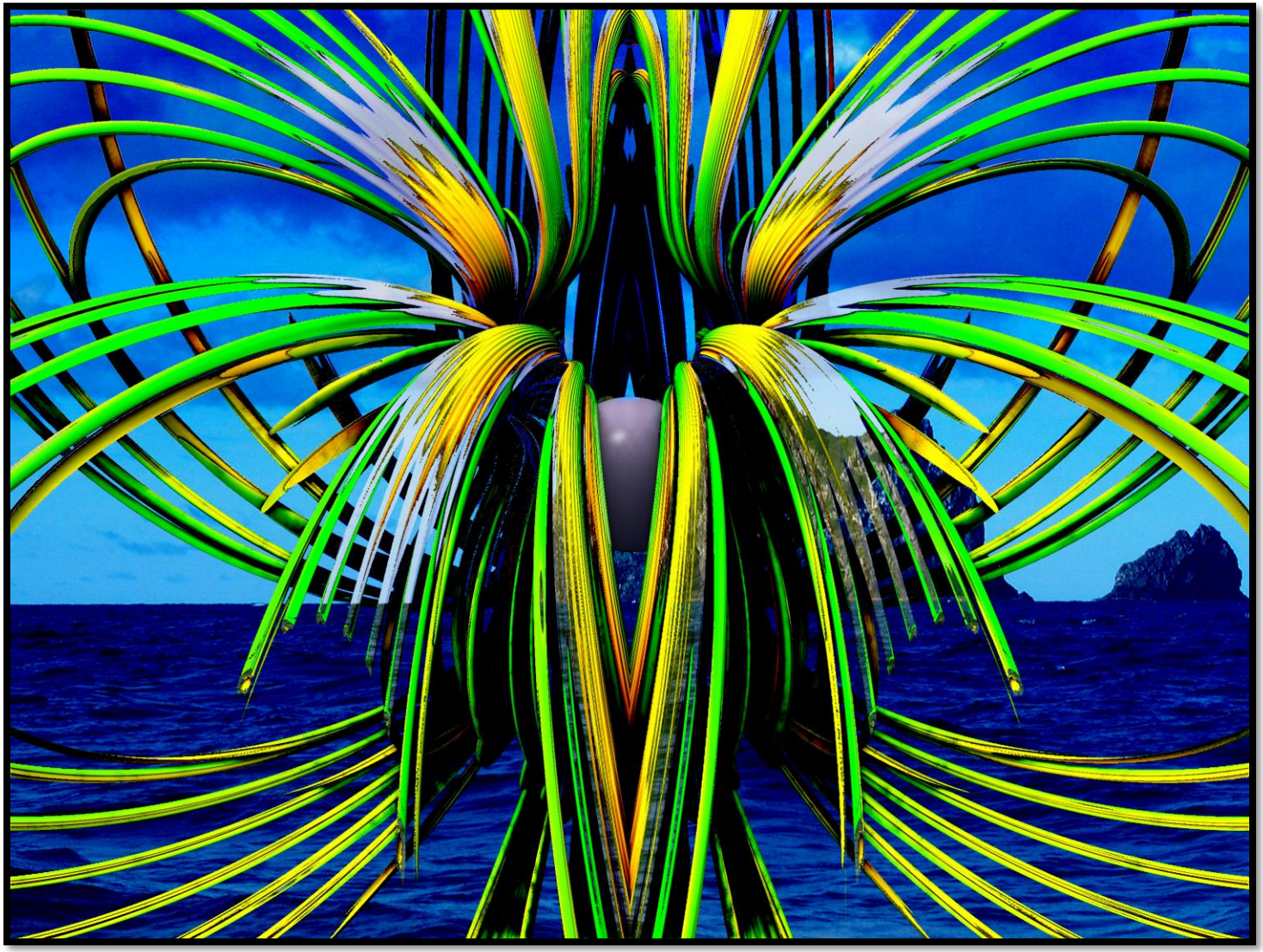


"Tree of Life, TRAPPIST1-d"

Dear Me,

The pearl from this aptly named plant contains a compound that when prepared properly offers some relief from the Kepler Plague. By combining a knowledge of such folk remedies with advanced distillation equipment, the mixed populace of locals and colonists were together able to weather the storm that toppled their more sophisticated planetary neighbors.

"*..these men saved my life by frightening away my physician, whose throat they threatened to cut if I was not cured within a given time. To this consolatory assurance of posthumous retribution, and a resolute refusal of Dr. Romanelli's prescriptions, I attributed my recovery.*" (John Galt's 'The Life of Lord Byron', L.B.)



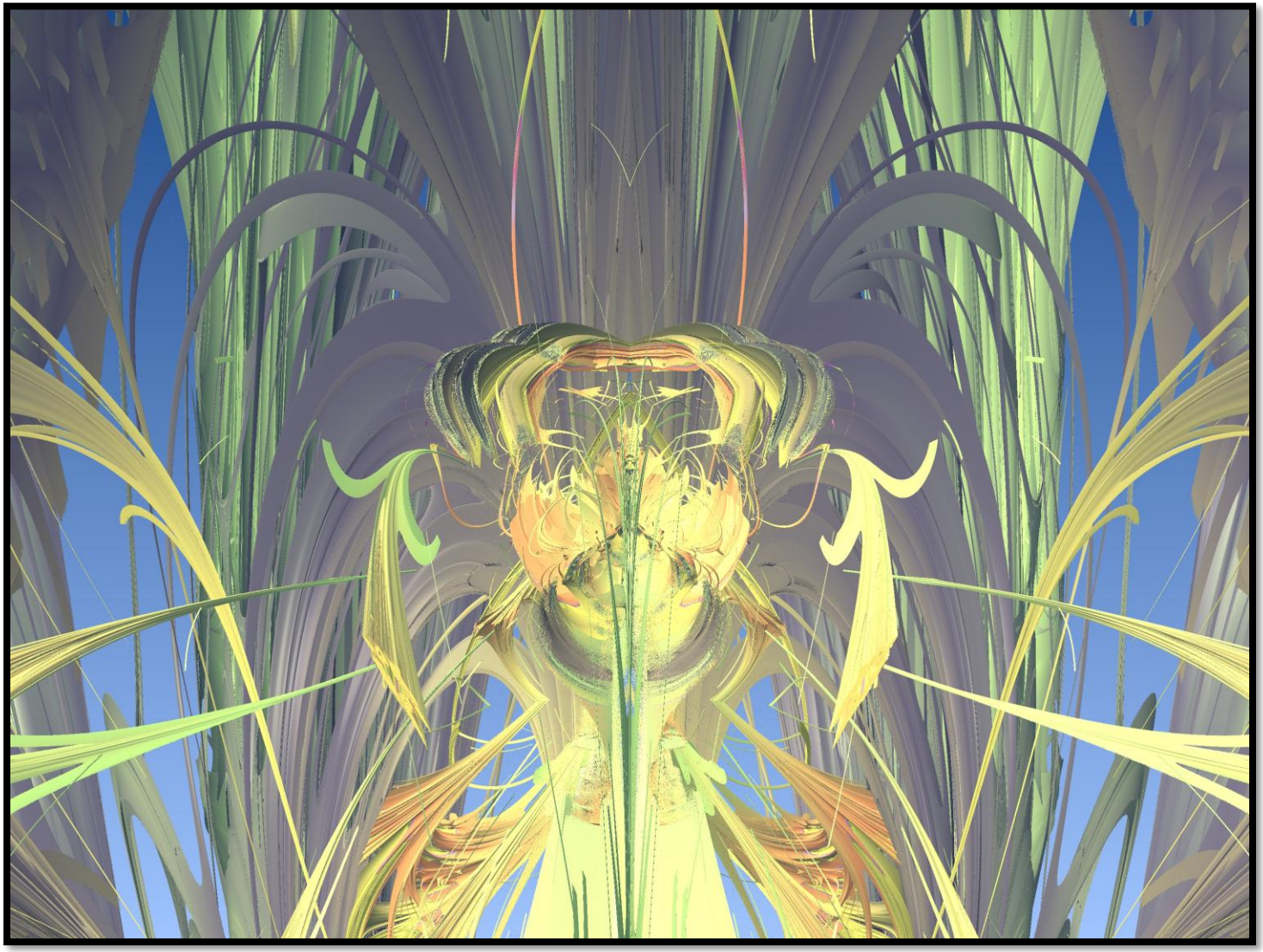
"Path of Destruction, TRAPPIST1-e"

Dear Me,

I've joined a tour of the neighboring planet, the inhabitants of which annihilated themselves in a nuclear winter a few local centuries ago. I consider myself fortunate as the borders have just opened, and wetware visitors are prohibited because of background radiation.

The group leader (pictured here) is an intimidating hologram who calls himself "The Angel of Death." I'm looking forward to hearing what he has to say about these doomed people and their tragic fate.

"The flash of wit- the bright intelligence, The beam of song-the blaze of eloquence, Set with their sun but still have left behind/ The enduring produce of immortal Mind" (On the Death of Richard Brinsley Sheridan, L.B.)



"Temple of the Fearsome Self, TRAPPIST1-e"

Dear Me,

Pictured is the central altar for the state religion of the Northern Territories. The people who lived here considered themselves to be gods, and expected veneration from other regions, which apparently fueled on-going tensions with the South. What machinations populate the mind of someone who identifies with a cruel and menacing statue such as this, I wonder?

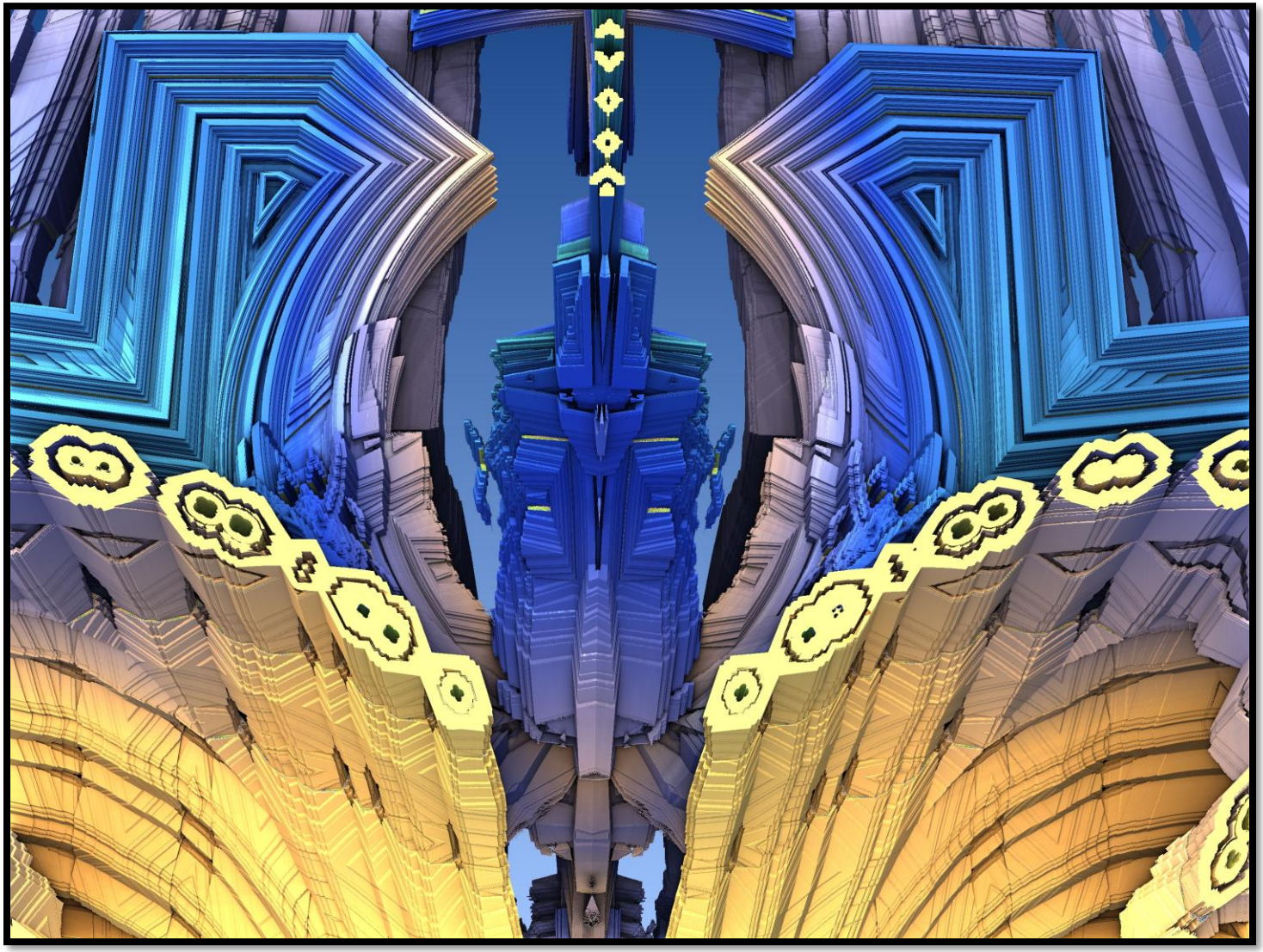
"*Ay, in spirit, Although a child of greatness; he is one/ Who would become a throne, or overthrow one*" (Marino Faliero, Doge of Venice, L.B.)

"The Candle Extinguished, TRAPPIST1-e"

Dear Me,

The population had no immunity whatsoever to the Kepler Plague, which soon took them to the brink of extinction. Scientists in the South developed a stopgap aerosol, which they loaded into delivery systems such as this. Tragically, the idea of owing their lives to another region was too much for the Northerners, who wanted the launch delayed until they could develop their own version. Tensions escalated, and the candle of hope was snuffed out before daybreak by a quick and devastating nuclear war.

"*The great error of Napoleon, 'if we have writ our annals true,' was a continued obtrusion on mankind of his want of all community of feeling for or with them; perhaps more offensive to human vanity than the active cruelty of more trembling and suspicious tyranny.*" (Childe Harold's Pilgrimage, L.B.)"

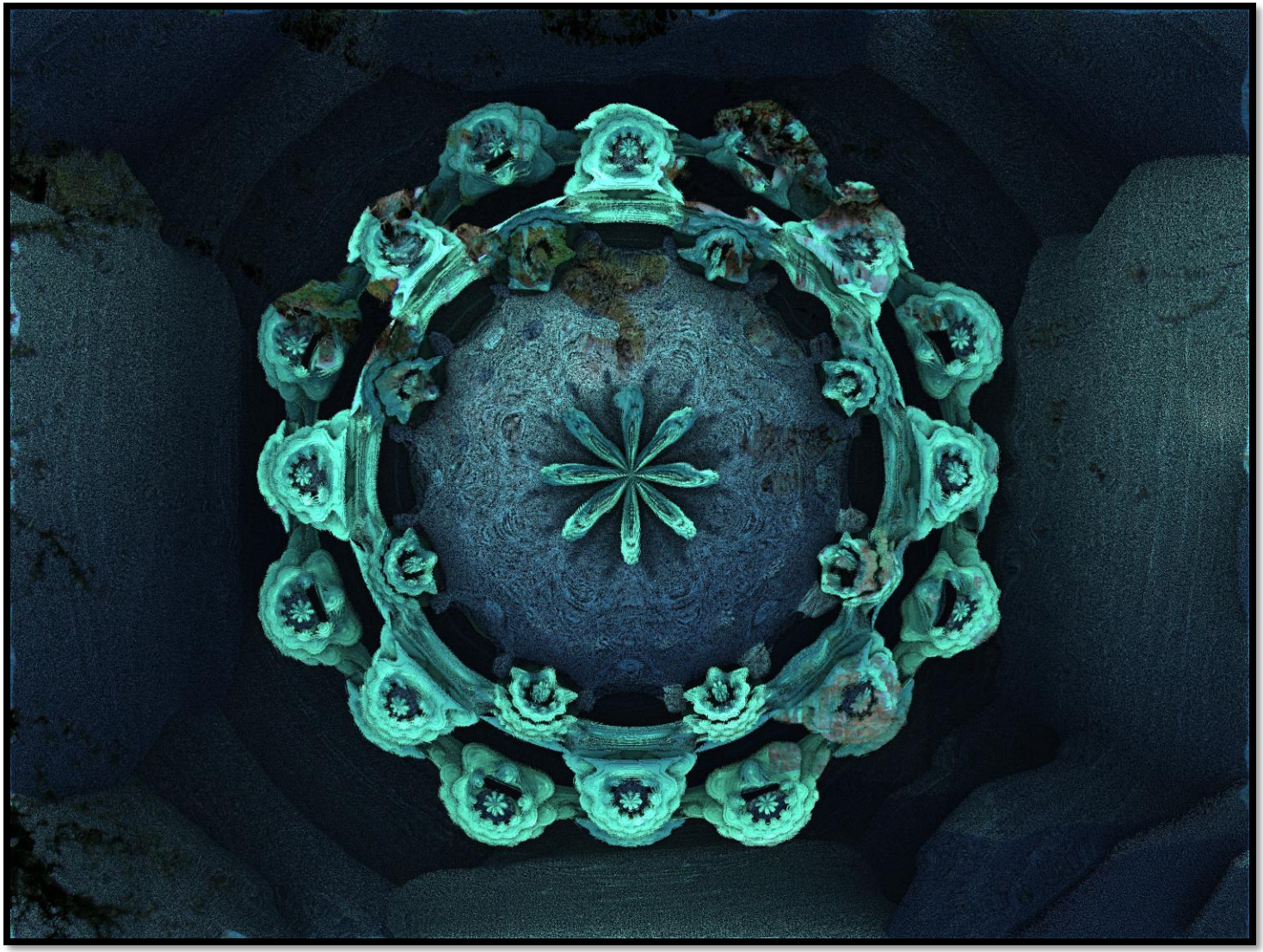


“The Slow Goodbye, TRAPPIST1-e"

Dear Me,

My fellow travelers and I spent the last standard week of this tour living together in an underground bunker just as the last survivors of the war had done. Knowing that supplies couldn't last, they sent a distress signal to distant rural worker drones, and then hoped for the best. The signal was received at multiple sites, but none within actionable range. The last of this race perished while hoping for a miracle that never arrived. I cannot express how I felt when I watched the oxygen count run out.

"*How do thy branches, moaning to the blast, Invite the bosom to recall the past; And seem to whisper, as they gently swell, Take, while thou can'st, a lingering last farewell!*" (Lines Written Beneath an Elm in the Churchyard of Harrow, L.B.)



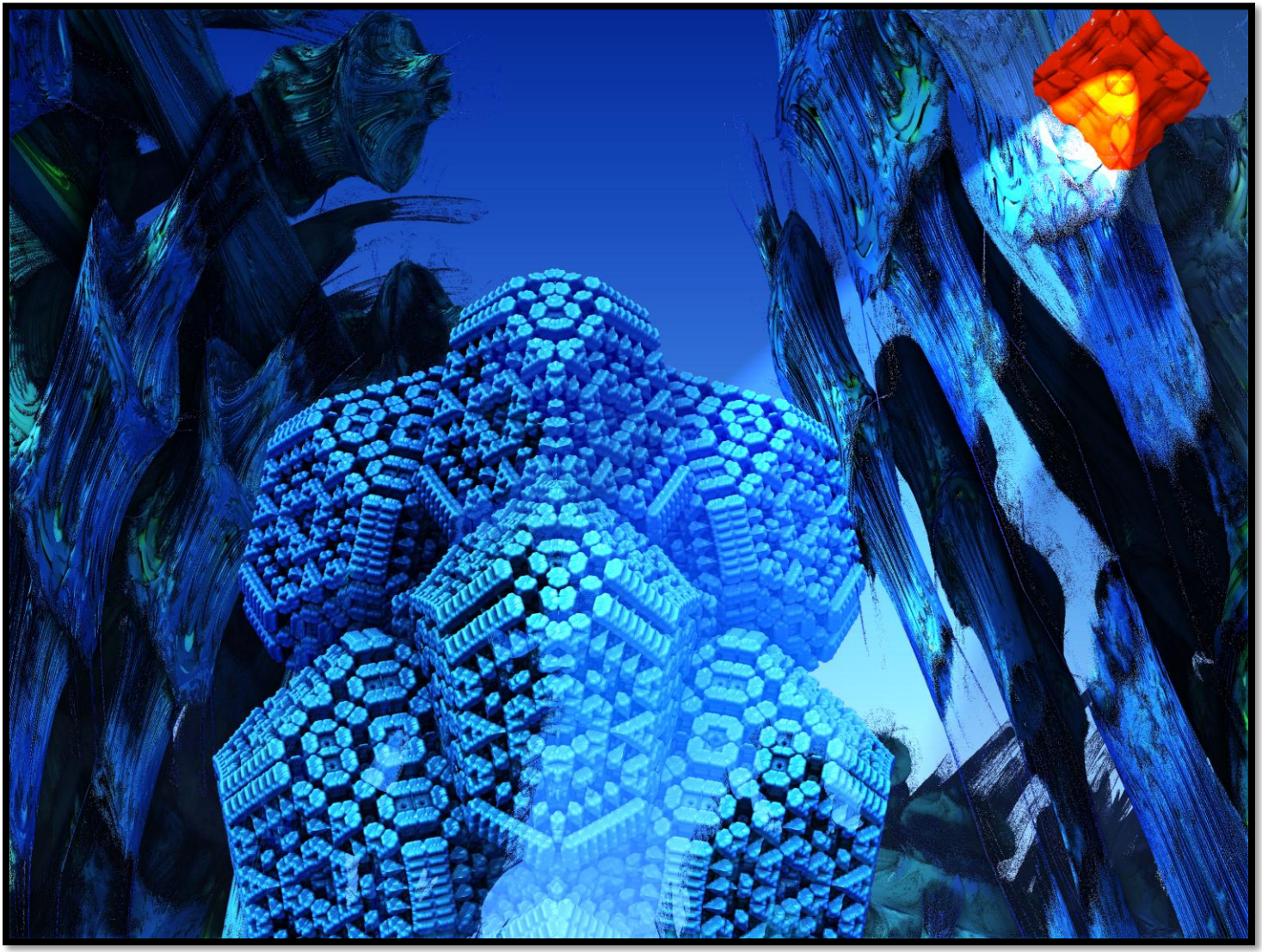
Kepler 186 (493 LY)

"Delphi 2.0, Valley of the Bones, Kepler 186f"

Dear Me,

Visitors bring their burdens to the Oracle, and are inevitably rewarded with a glimpse of the way to lighten them. Locals tell me the statue is merely unremarkable stone, but the incense and strobe lights combine to distract the conscious mind, allowing one's true heart to shine through.

"*Yet still there whispers the small voice within, Heard through Gain's silence, and o'er Glory's din: Whatever creed be taught, or land be trod, Man's conscience is the Oracle of God*." (The Island, L.B.)

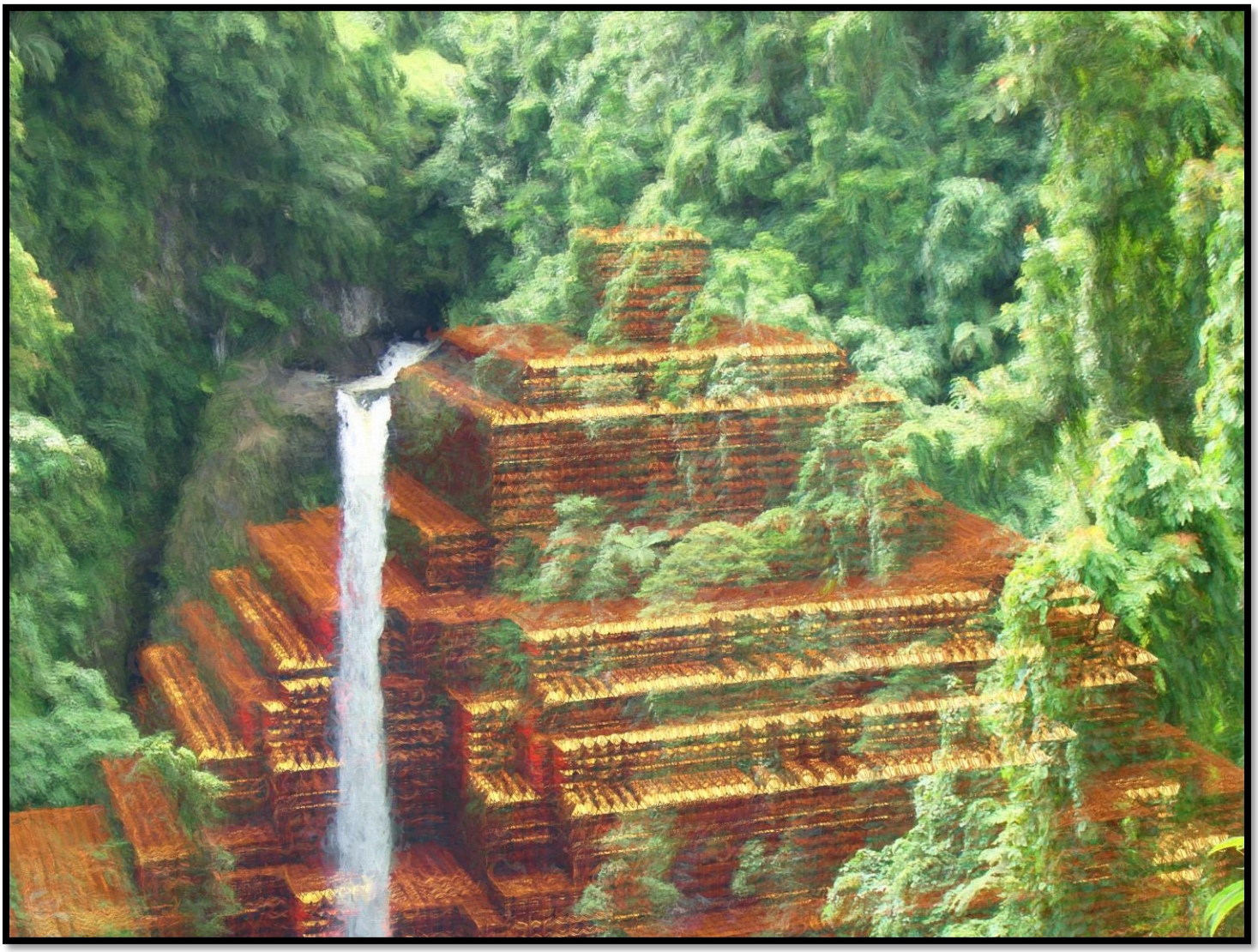


"Ziggurats and Ball Courts, Hexaflake State, Kepler 186f"

Dear Me,

Clearly a people with refined sensibilities, and adept at reconciling crisp geometry with the stochastic chaos of the living jungle. Balanced against this we, have their devilish animus, which took great delight in the bloodthirsty excesses of the ball court games.

"*I am so changeable, being everything by turns and nothing long - such a strange mélange of good and evil, that it would be difficult to describe me.*" (A journal of conversations with L.B. by Marguerite Countess of Blessington W. Veazie)



"Twin Lines of Monumental Heads, Integral Valley, Kepler 186f"

Dear Me,

Are these the cold remains of a race of giants? Were they fashioned to mirror the faces of the artisans? Or do they perhaps reflect the aspirations of a diminutive race, feeble artists seeking to negate their limitations through creative hyperbole?

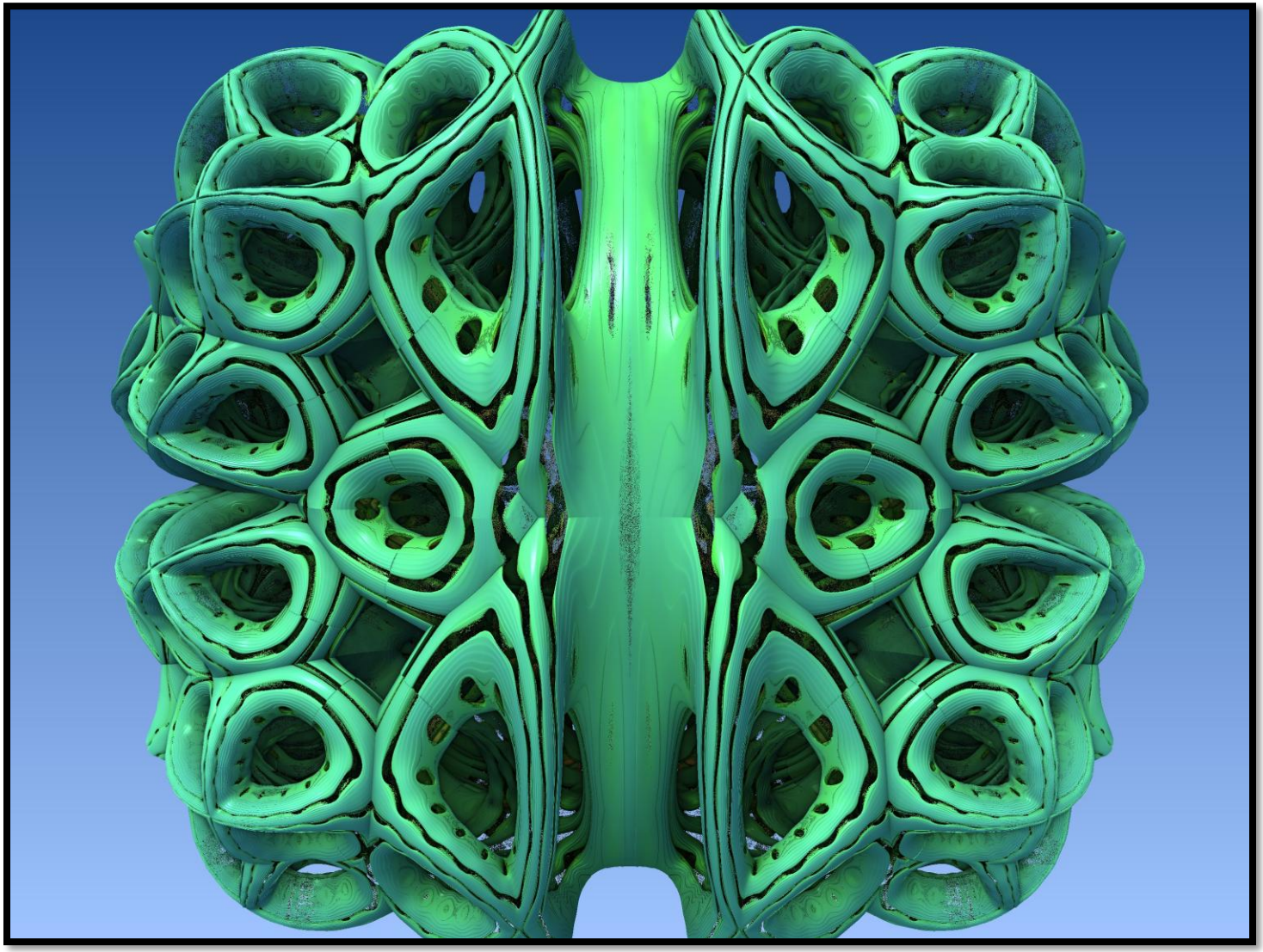
"*Near this spot are deposited the remains of one who possessed beauty without vanity, strength without insolence, courage without ferocity, and all the virtues of man, without his vices.*" (Epitaph for a Dog, L.B.)

"Brief Music, Kepler 186f"

Dear Me,

An exquisite wind instrument spied only on ceremonial occasions. When thrown into the air or dropped from a great height, it emits an eerie and distinctive whistling sound. The most expensive varieties are crafted to shatter on impact, as a reminder from the benefactor to take pleasure in each moment.

"*My time has been passed viciously and agreeably-at thirty-one so few years months days hours or minutes remain that 'Carpe diem' is not enough-I have been obliged to crop even the seconds-for who can trust to tomorrow?*" (L.B).



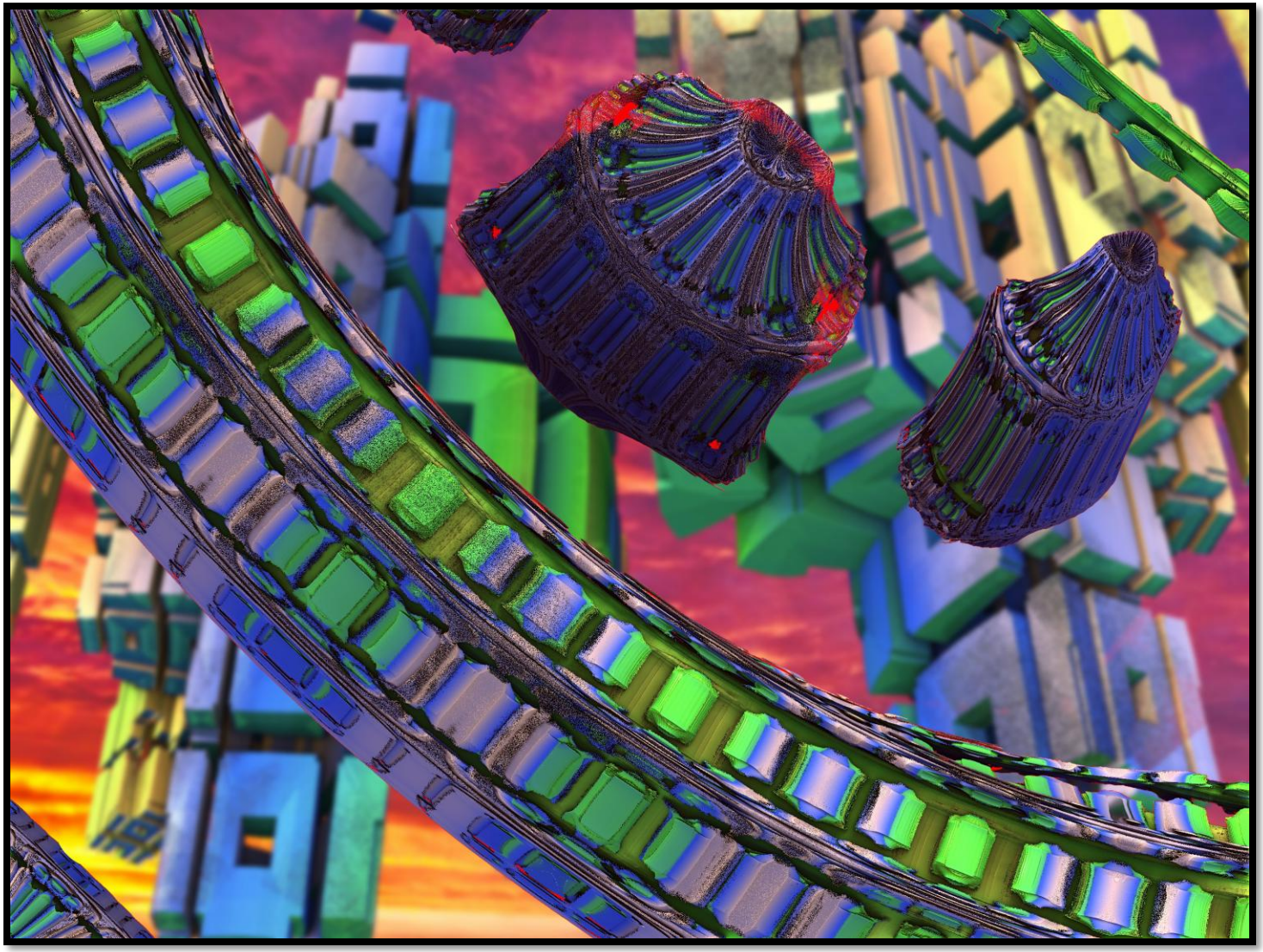
Kepler 1544 (1138 LY)

"PaRaDICE City, Kepler 1544b"

Dear Me,

Feared and revered as the mythical First Systems homeworld, Kepler 1544b was long given a wide berth by travelers and settlers alike. Recent reports of technological wonders however have whetted the appetite of the adventurous and the avaricious. While the Coalition and the Independents debate matters of jurisdiction, much of the largest city shell has already been claimed by warlords, misfits, treasure hunters, and New Hope adherents. Blame my love for classical Terran Westerns, but it sounds irresistible.

In Gibbon, vol. x. p. 161, is the following sentence: "The vulgar dialect of the city was gross and barbarous, though the compositions of the church and palace sometimes affected to copy the purity of the Attic models." (L.B. quoting Gibbon)



"Theatre of Life, Kepler 1544b"

Dear Me,

The Coalition Quarter is a good place to start, and the nightlife certainly has its charms–witness the Theater of Life. A First Systems relic, best described as part entertainment, part spiritual gateway. At center stage a mysterious sphere, and within that a miraculous device that warms cold facts until reality melts into possibility. As witnesses to this technomagical performance, theatergoers are treated to a panorama of other ways their lives might have unfolded, either comedic or tragic depending on the evening's chosen theme. Musicals night is highly recommended.

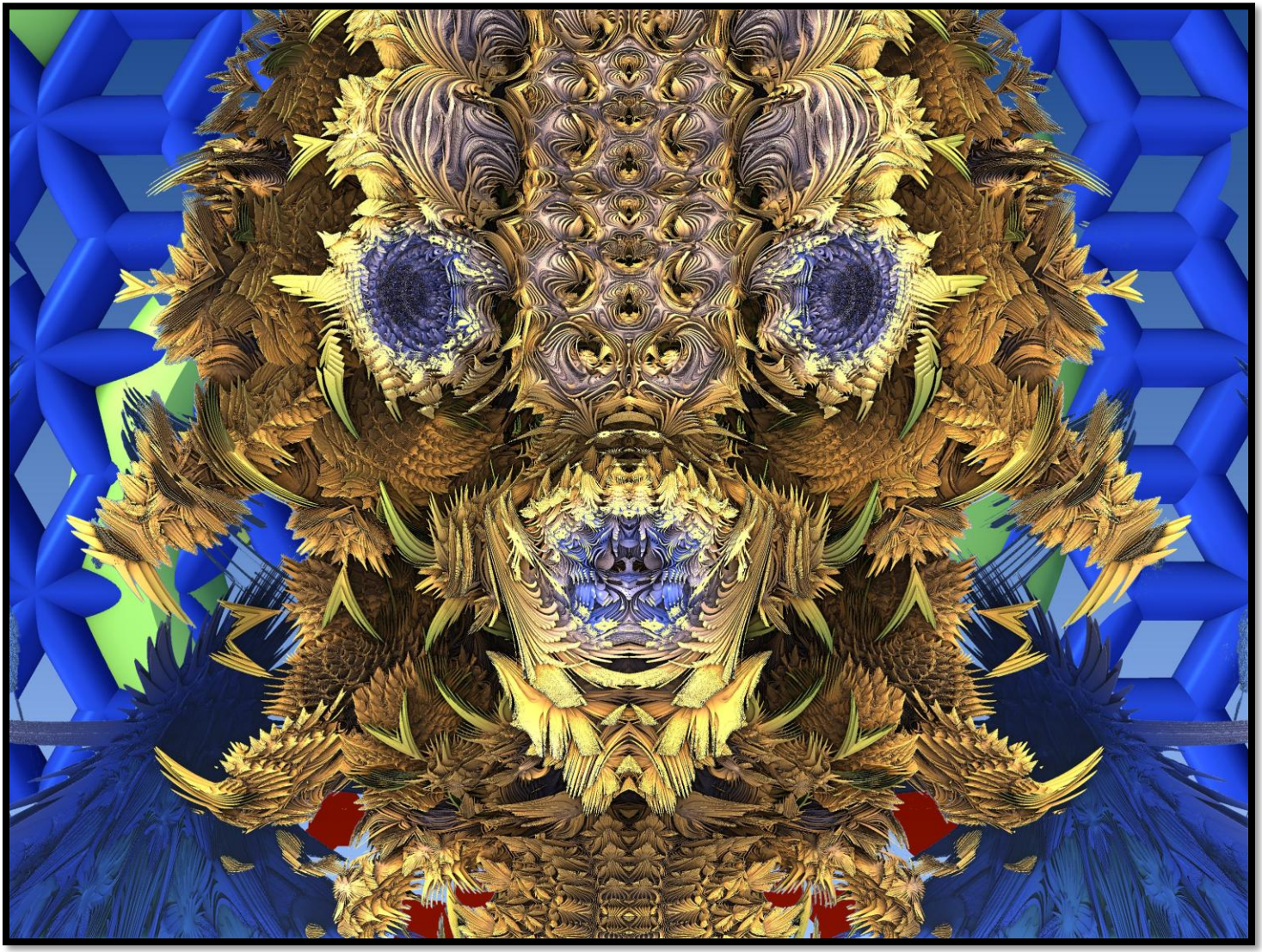
"*I admire the old English dramatists; but this is quite another field, and has nothing to do with theirs. I want to make…a mental theatre*." (Letter to publisher John Murray, L.B.)

"Dax Something, Kepler 1544b"

Dear Me,

Early the second local day, I crossed into the Nonaligned Quarter and started vidding. In no time, I was led to a nearby hotel for an audience with the neighborhood enforcer. A woman of incomparable beauty in her mid-200's I would guess, her demeanor suggested a lead pipe wrapped in velvet. I politely answered her equally polite questions about who I was, and volunteered something about my Grand Tour. "Aren't you scared wandering around here on your own?" she asked. "I'm scared a lot of the time," I replied, "but that's never stopped me." She gestured and went away. Then her thugs led me to a bare room and told me to get a good sleep, because we were going to see something big in the morning. Will I be stripped for parts and melted down? Possibly. But we all die, and tomorrow is as good a day as any.

"*In marble-paved pavilion, where a spring/ Of living water from the centre rose, Whose bubbling did a genial freshness fling. And soft voluptuous couches breathed repose, Ali reclined, a man of war and woes; yet in his lineaments ye cannot trace, While gentleness her milder radiance throws Along that aged venerable face, The deeds that lurk beneath, and stain him with disgrace*."
(Childe Harold's Pilgrimage, L.B.)



"I Did This, Kepler 1544b"

Dear Me,

My new admirer, her retinue and I zipped up the coast in a windowless hovervan to what I was assuming was a chop shop. When we finally stopped, I was told to get out, and was led up a steep pathway to where this magnificent wreck came into view. My metaphorical jaw dropped, which seemed to genuinely please Dax, who boasted proudly that it was she who had taken down the craft. Dubious, given the extreme age of the weathering patterns, but I focused on sounding impressed and grateful for her hospitality, which I was. And thus I lived to cross the border again.

"*A noble wreck in ruinous perfection*!" (Manfred, L.B.).

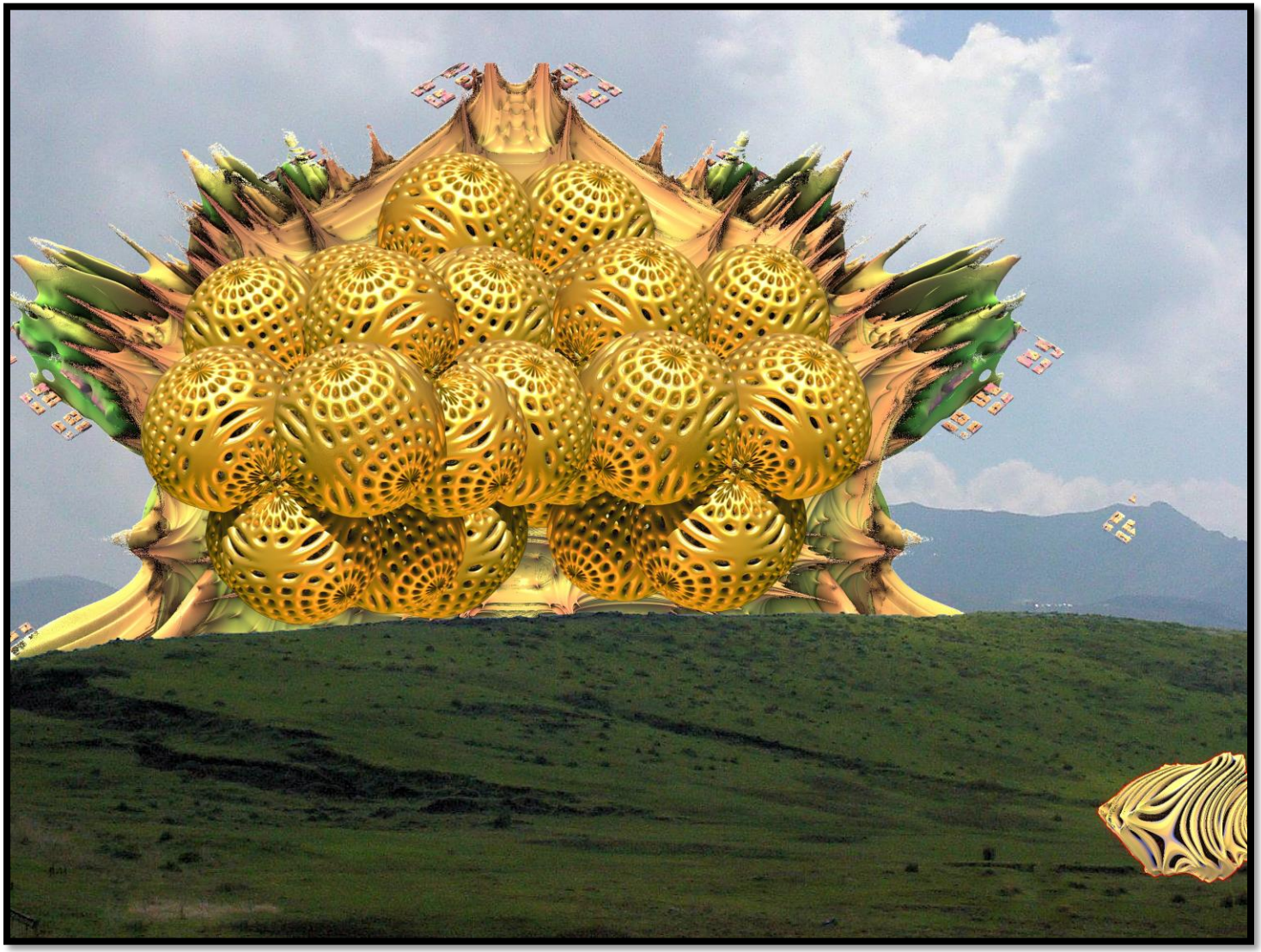
Kepler 62 (1200 LY)

"Terracentrism, Kepler 62e"

Dear Me,

Using the term "bees" for the hyper intelligent species on this planet is considered the worst kind of terracentrism, but if their Queen has no problem with it, I don't see why I should. Pictured is the imposing facade of Hive 0001 of the Thane Regency. This is as close as I can get, unfortunately, as the thought processes of droids with thinner skins than mine have occasionally disrupted cooperation between the workers, and they don't wish to take any chances. A thousand local cycles of harmony and heritage, so close yet out of reach!

"*As, rising on its purple wing, The insect queen of eastern spring/ O'er emerald meadows of Kashmeer/ Invites the young pursuer near, And leads him on from flower to flower, A weary chase and wasted hour, Then leaves him, as it soars on high, With panting heart and tearful eye: So beauty lures the full-grown child, With hue as bright, and wing as wild*" (The Two Butterflies L.B.)



"Clever Rodents, Kepler 62e"

Dear Me,

In ancient times, the bee hegemony was restricted to the North, while two other species, *rodere* and *lacerta*, vied for control of the South. Shown is the entrance to the newly inaugurated *Rodere* Museum. It showcases their sprawling underground empire, which at its height spanned half the continent, with burrows enough for 100 million. Time has since reduced their engineering marvel to a high-tech playground for exoplanetary archaeologists. Cronus does indeed devour his children.

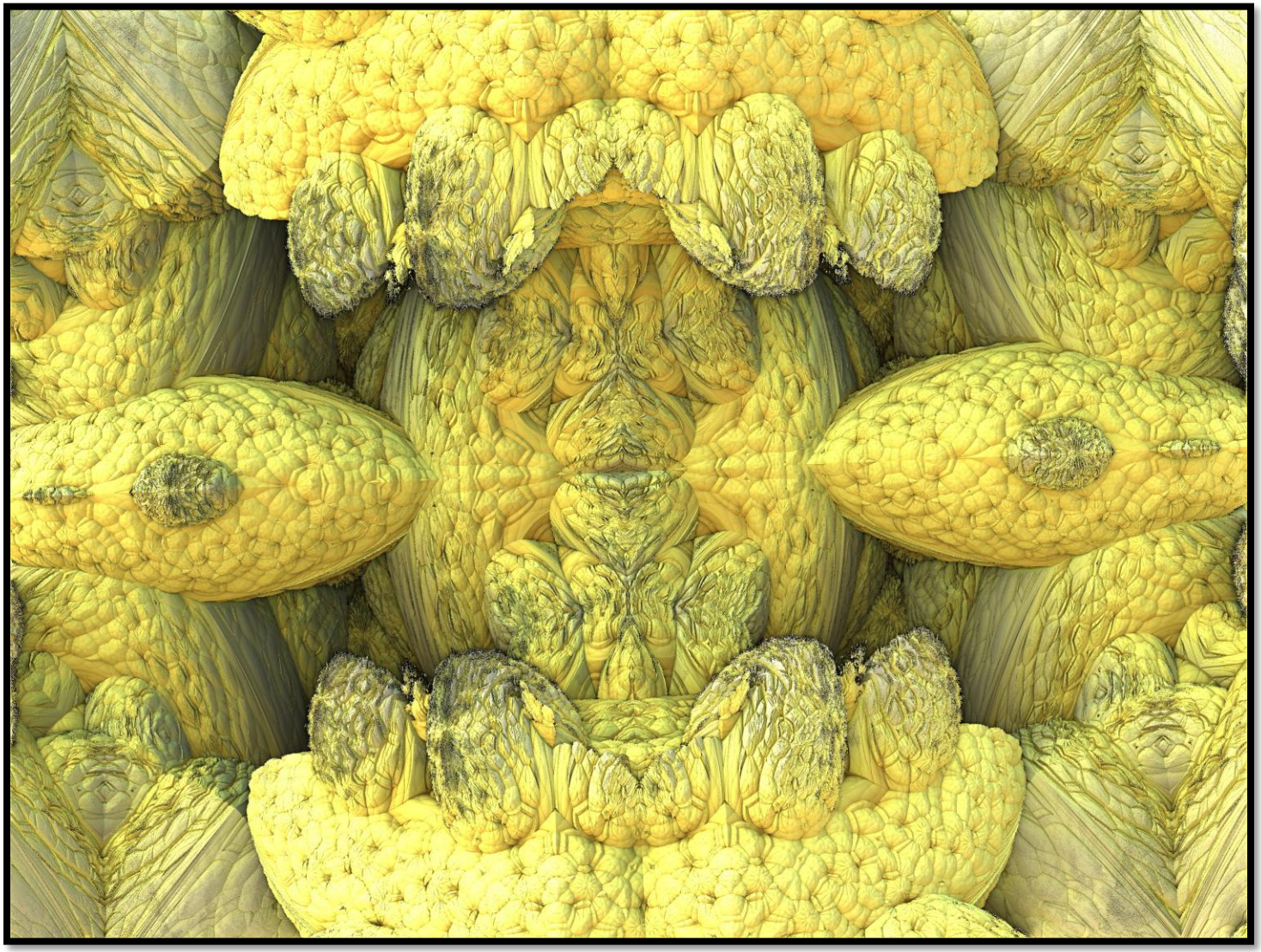
"*Varied above, but still alike below; The urn may shine-the ashes will not glow*" (The Age of Bronze, L.B.)

"Cruel Neighbors, Kepler 62e"

Dear Me,

Depicted is an unsettling example of lithic embellishment by the blood-thirsty *lacerta*, a reptilian race and aboveground apex predator of the South. On the whole they had no qualms about butchering the *rodere*, and took to raiding the underground metropolis whenever food was scarce. The stuff of nightmares.

"...this Galiongŭe, To whom thy plighted vow is sworn, Is leader of those pirate hordes, Whose laws and lives are on their swords; To hear whose desolating tale/ Would make thy waning cheek more pale" (The Bride of Abydos, L.B.)

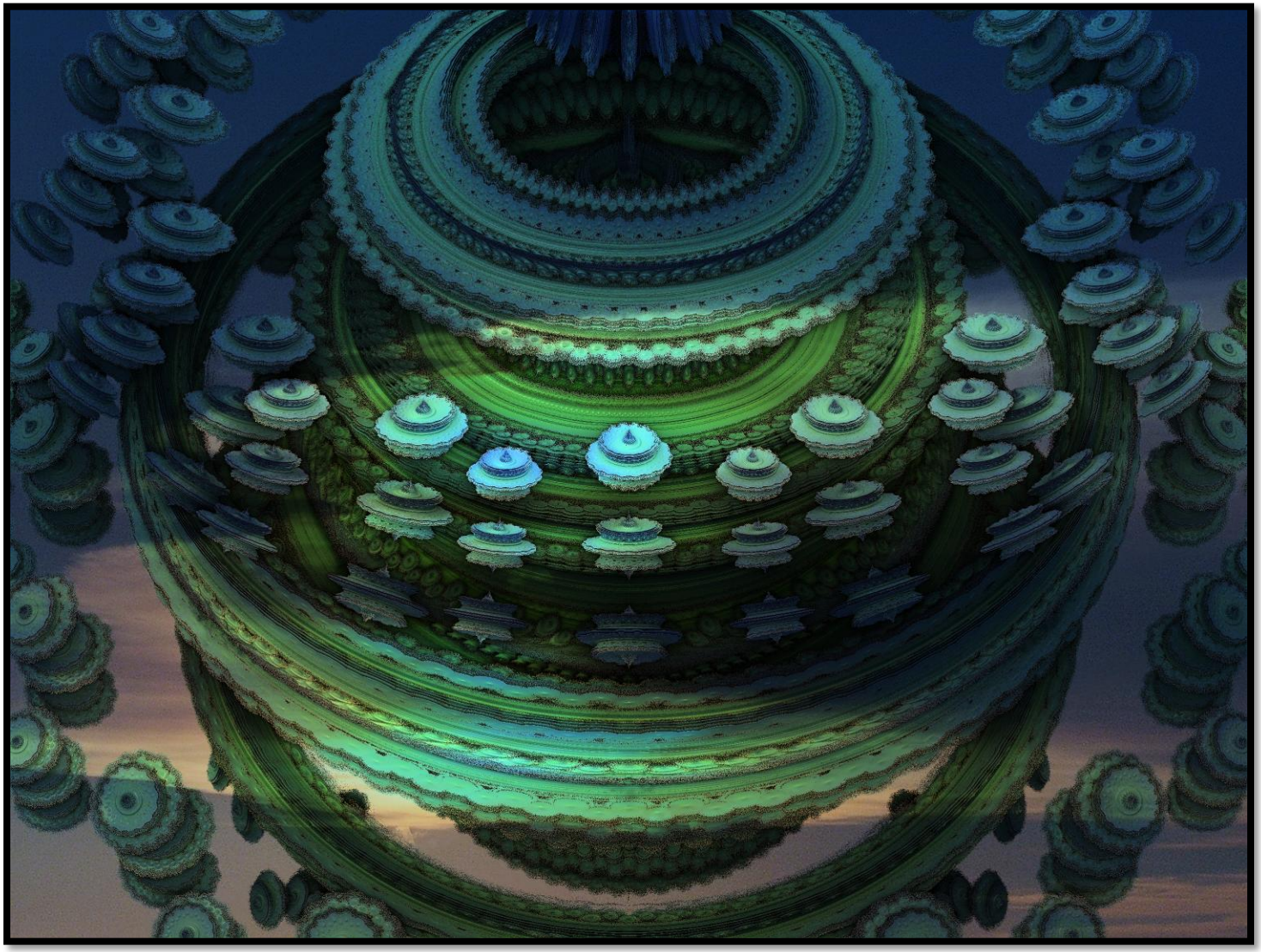


"Incursion Sphere Disaster, Kepler 62e"

Dear Me,

Both races are said to have perished in an otherwise uneventful instant about 4 local millennia ago. The *rodere* had been experimenting with the use of scrubber swarms to fine-tune the balance of atmospheric gases, an inherently dangerous proposition, as other species have learned the hard way. Tragically, an ill-timed attack by the *lacerta* threw the settings into disarray; instead of scrubbing CO2, the devices precipitated out the O2, and the southern continent was summarily depopulated. Far to the north, many of the bees were stunned or killed, but enough recovered to rebuild the hive. Life is precious, and life is cruel.

"'*Tis vain to struggle let me perish young/ Live as I lived, and love as I have loved; To dust if I return, from dust I sprung, And then, at least, my heart can ne'er be moved*." (Stanzas to the Po, L.B.)



Kepler 452 (1402 LY)

“Scientific Funhouse, Kepler 452b"

Dear Me,

It seems fitting that a planet at the very border of known space is also one of the most inscrutable. According to the briefing for new arrivals, the mysterious inhabitants of 452b were compulsive data gatherers who established a network of sensor transmitters encompassing dozens of systems. Spying on our collective successes and failures gave them the raw materials to turbocharge their own advancement. Ultimately, they learned to weave science into art and art into magic before vanishing forever in a cloud of knowing. Fortunately, they left behind their broken toys and crumpled papers, creating a trail of breadcrumbs to keep the archaeologists busy for a few lifetimes.

"*There are ten thousand tones and signs/We hear and see, but none defines,-Involuntary sparks of thought, Which strike from out the heart o’erwrought, And form a strange intelligence, Alike mysterious and intense*" (Mazeppa, L.B.)

"A Technomagical Bagatelle, Kepler 452b"

Dear Me,

Joined an excursion to what has come to be known as the Cave of Portents. Each traveler/initiate proceeds individually through the fearsome entrance, where they have the experience of reuniting briefly with someone they've lost who was very important to them. I had the peculiar experience of meeting myself.

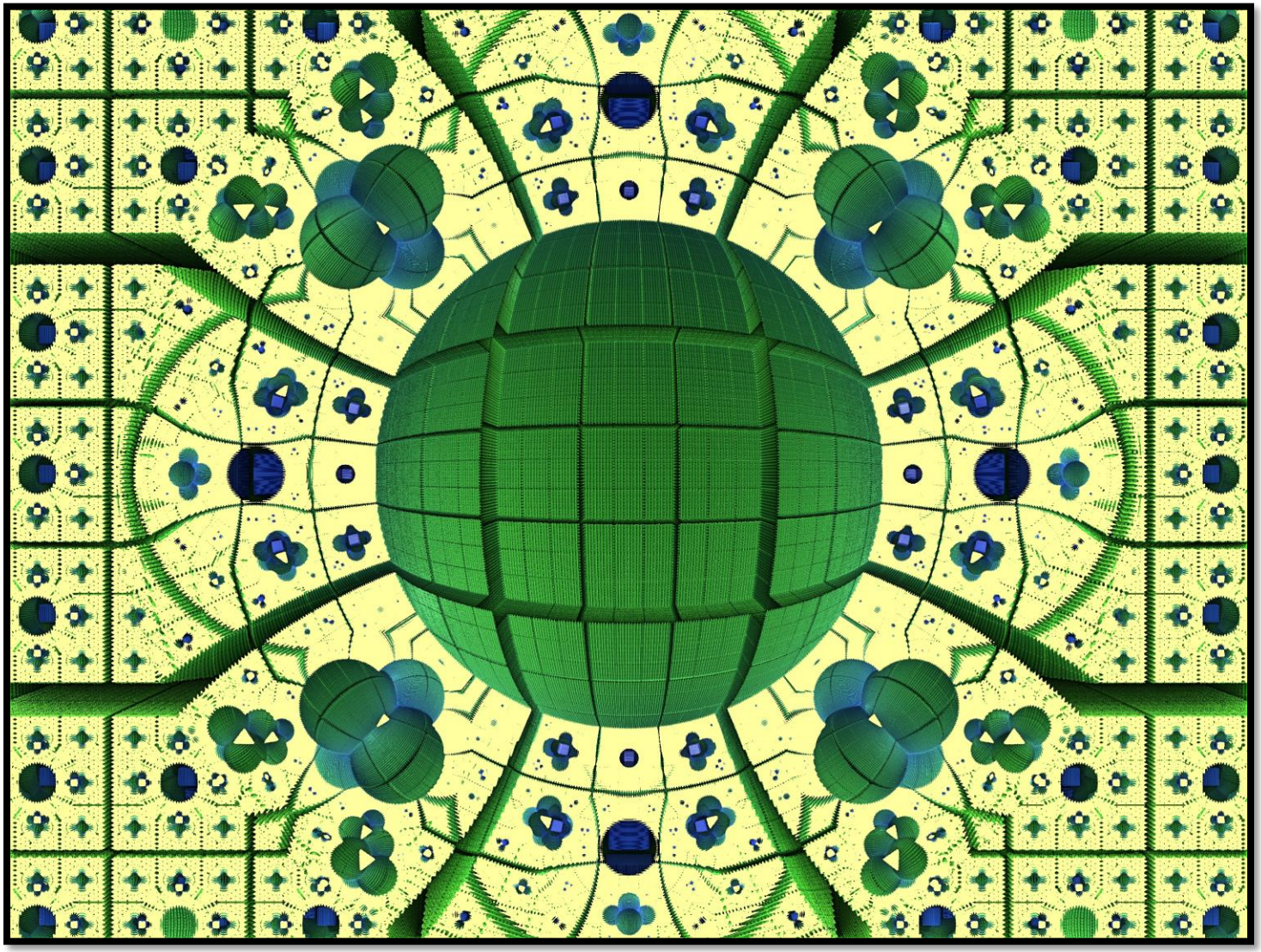
"*They came like truth, and disappeared like dreams*" (Childe Harold's Pilgrimage, L.B.)

"Weird Science, Kepler 452b"

Dear Me,

Awesome chat with one of the forensic archaeologists tasked with making sense of this mysterious civilization. According to him, their approach to reality is encapsulated in the figure depicted. The central sphere shows the positions of their interstellar listening devices, but can also be interpreted as a map of phase space, or the evolution of meta-ley lines over time. The jewel-like nodes at the corners are thought to represent mini universes coexistent with, but distinct from the familiar multiverse. He predicts it will take another standard century or so to make sense of it all. The mind reels.

"*While high-born ladies in their magic cell, Forbidding knights to read who cannot spell, Dispatch a courier to a wizard's grave, And fight with honest men to shield a knave*." (English Bards, and Scotch Reviewers, L.B.)

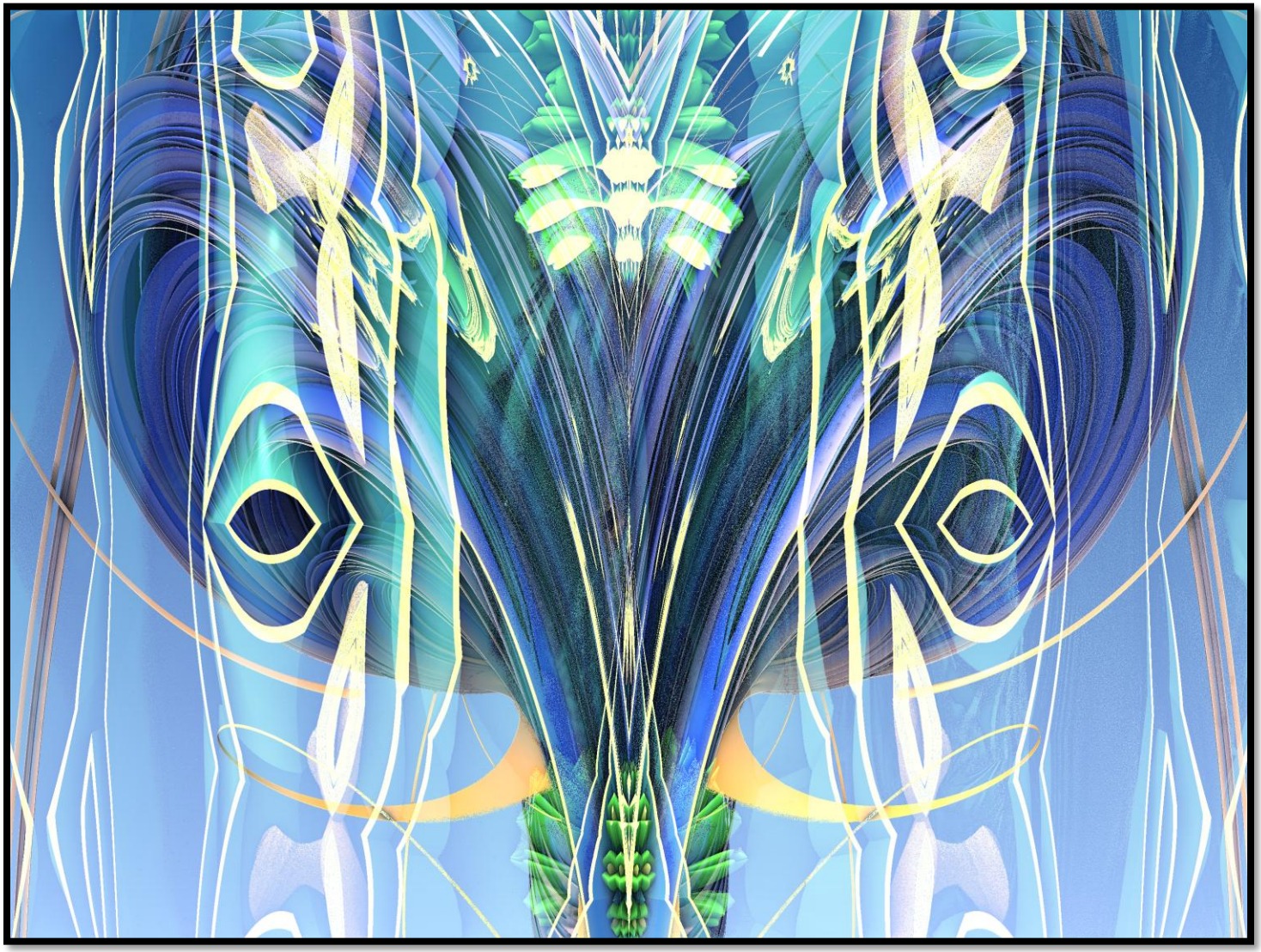


"Nothing Ventured, Kepler 452b"

Dear Me,

On a whim, I answered a call for volunteers put out by the President of the Science Council (depicted), with the result that I have secured a seat on the maiden voyage of the “Beacon of Hope.” This cutting-edge vessel was constructed in orbit and incorporates the mind-bending insights gleaned here over the years. According to the briefing, our destination will be the border beacon, which is ideal for me, and since the trip bypasses the temporal dimension entirely, it should literally take no time there or back. Can’t wait.

"*Ah, me! what hand can pencil guide, or pen. To follow half on which the eye dilates, Through views more dazzling unto mortal ken/Than those whereof such things the bard relates*." (Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage, L.B.)

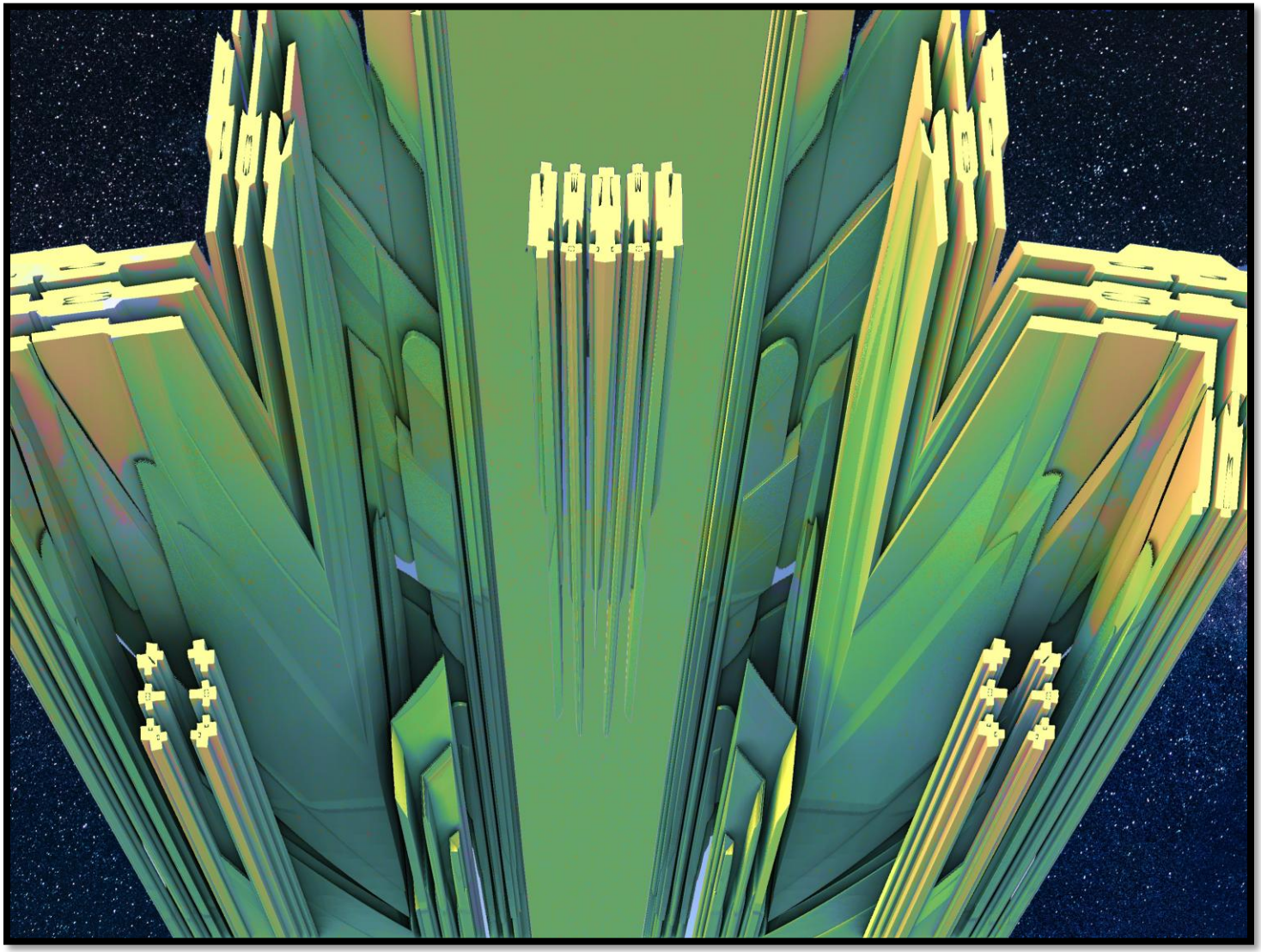


"Beacon of Hope"

Dear Me!!!

"*Ye friends of my heart, Ere from you I depart, This hope to my breast is most near: If again we shall meet, In this rural retreat, May we meet, as we part, with a Tear*." (The Tear. L.B.)

END OF SIGNAL



About the Artists

The Davmandy Collection is an extended artistic collaboration between Dr. David Petersen and Mandy Conti. As photographers, they have traveled the globe together for more than 20 years, compiling an extensive portfolio in the process. These images then become the canvas for adventures in painstaking and elaborate digital manipulation, using a range of sophisticated software. The results are sometimes striking, sometimes whimsical, never boring.

Their artwork has been viewed more than one million times online through various social media channels and the davmandycollection.com website.

The Museum of Exoplanetary Archaeology, Mars Colony 7, the Jupiter Six Galleries, the Taurus-Littrow Lunar Repository, the Terran Art Museum and Cultural Preservation Society, and this book all take place in the same universe. The images are primarily fractal-based and many are available as NFTs. Most of the names for people and dig sites incorporate fractal terminology, and any planets mentioned are thought at present to be at least potentially habitable.

lulu.com/spotlight/drdavidpetersen